

## The Middle Class: Consuming and Consumed The Romance of Bombay Cinema

### **Neha Chadha**

India's middle class has grown rapidly and was estimated to be over 100 million people in 1994, out of a total population of over 900 million.<sup>[1]</sup> Today it is already bigger than the population of the United States and is expected to grow to 445 million by 2006. This enormity of the middle class gives it the power to play the decisive role of an 'opinion' class, and therefore, it cannot be undermined by the producers of an urban art like cinema.

In his essay, 'An Intelligent Critic's Guide to Indian Cinema', Ashis Nandy says -

Some of the common features of and the differences between art films, middle-brow cinema (which for a while was called, quite appropriately, middle cinema) and commercial films in India are now perhaps clearer. All three depend on the middle classes for legitimacy and critical acclaim..<sup>[2]</sup>

The Indian film must cater to the needs, demands and desires of the middle class and this makes middle class opinion a benchmark for its operation. But with the changing form that is evident in the recent popular Hindi films, a doubt arises - is it still the middle class who determine the 'worth' of a film? We shall attempt to answer this question, but to do so we need to have an understanding of the middle class cinema and its characteristics and how these were starkly different from the Bombay cinema of the post-liberalization era.

### **The middle class cinema**

Madhava Prasad refers to a certain tendency in popular Hindi cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He says that this set of films '...was addressed to the subject, the individual in society, faced with the struggle for existence,

the locus of desires, fears and hopes<sup>[3]</sup> . He refers to this as 'the middle class cinema'. This sort of cinema left out political turmoil of that period on the one hand, and on the other, avoided the use of 'lowly' and 'cheap' entertainment that was a common element of the commercial film form. Prasad chooses films such as *Guddi*, *Rajnigandha*, *Abhimaan*, *Kora Kaagaz*, *Anubhav* and *Dastak*. According to him,

The middle class cinema is predominantly characterized by an emphasis on the extended familial network as the proper site of production of nuclear couples... This is because middle class narratives are confined to the world of the upper castes. These castes find themselves dispersed in an urban world, and define themselves as the middle class in the language of the modern state, while maintaining their endogamous identities. In deference to the semiotic prohibition which inaugurates the modern state, the caste identity of this urban society is generally concealed behind the term 'middle class'. The middle class however also carries the burden of national identity on its shoulders.<sup>[4]</sup>

These films can be distinguished easily by their form which was evidently different from mainstream Hindi popular cinema. One thread that connected them was the realist tendency. They followed a linear causal narrative unlike the 'run of the mill' Hindi film which was highly fragmented and portrayed a repeatedly interrupted form. The protagonists were not superhuman miracle-beings; they appeared more like the people-next-door. They were grey rather than black and white. The narratives upheld middle class morals and placed 'izzat' over 'paisa' (honour over monetary and material gains). Therefore, these films were categorically not overtly melodramatic and took it almost as a responsibility to educate the film-viewing public, cultivating a 'good taste' in them. Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anand*, *Guddi* or *Bawarchi* are excellent examples of middle class cinema where righteousness is placed in the foreground, and family is given a special reality.

Madhava Prasad further identifies certain trends in the Middle Class cinema--

The middle class film foregrounds the problem of bourgeois subjectively through the exploration of the contradictions and conflicts of conjugality. Sometimes the continued hold of the parental family over the conjugal scene is the source the conflict, as in *Kora Kagaz*. [5]

There was usually an ideological clash (more often a generation clash) that sometimes formed the focus of the film. Incidentally, the couple continued to be important, and in the mainstream Hindi cinema, the Romantic genre saw great success with the films of Rajesh Khanna, through his films - *Aradhana* (1969), *Khamoshi* (1969), *Safar* (1970) and *Anand* (1970) - the romantic poet and lover captured the hearts of all Indian women. Be it *Andaz* (1971), *Amar Prem* (1971) or *Bawarchi* (1972), Khanna 'with his smirk and unmistakably potato-shaped face was becoming a rage. His nod and wink could instill hysteria into an entire generation of females'<sup>[6]</sup> But gradually, romance took a backseat, and so did the middle class cinema. In its place, violence ruled the cinema of the 'angry young man' who voiced the insecurities of the deceived masses, and once again class contradictions became an important issue. Then liberalization ushered in the romantic film once more - although this time with many differences, the most significant being the gradual disappearance of the ever-powerful middle class from the mainstream Hindi film. This in turn was due to the emergence of a new urban middle class: a consequence of the growing consumer culture in India.

### ***Maine Pyaar Kiya* : A new visual landscape**

Before moving any further let us look at a film that radically altered the look of mainstream Hindi cinema - *Maine Pyar Kiya* (MPK,1989). The frames seem to be starkly different from any image that existed before in popular Hindi cinema as the narrative was embedded in images of consumption. Neon lights in the background, beverage brands in the foreground and foreign automobiles everywhere represented an entirely new aesthetic. And most importantly, the narrative is *not* about the middle class.

The film is about a young girl Suman (Bhagyashree), whose father (a village mechanic) leaves her in his old friend's (now a wealthy industrialist) house because he has to go out for work. There she meets Prem (Salman Khan), the industrialist's son, who has just returned from America after completing his MBA. The two become friends and eventually fall in love but the class differences between their families do not permit this relationship. Prem leaves his house, goes to the village and earns his bread through manual labour and finally succeeds in winning the consent of the girl's father. The industrialist also re-unites with his old friend. The ever-important values of loyalty and honour in friendship are re-confirmed, and the couple lives happily under the aegis of the 'joint family'.

Evidently, even though the film addresses the issue of the conjugal space and the couple, it is very unlike the 'middle class cinema'. There is indeed the conflict that arises due to the rich-boy-poor-girl situation; but the film goes beyond that and defines a new set of visual and narrative codes that continue to re-appear in Hindi commercial cinema. The new visual landscape is apparent. The indoor spaces are all lavish bungalows and affluent corporate offices with expensive interiors modeled on American decors. Prem's room is strewn with posters of international youth icons and sports gear. Not only are these items used in the mise-en-scene but they also become an integral part of the story itself. For instance, a boxing glove hangs at the entrance of Prem's room and it hits the vamp on her head when she enters: thus causing some laughter. The goods become essential to the film's narrative as well as its visual setting. The brand *Thums Up* appears a number of times in the film. In a scene where Prem is watching television, we hear the advertisement jingle '*Thums Up... Taste the thunder*'. There are various shots of the outdoor picnic in the song '*Kabutar Ja...*' where we see *Thums Up* bottles being opened (as an act of celebration) and the drink being served to the guests. The association of *Thums Up* with a certain sector of the youth (rich, English-speaking, fashionable and party-going) is easily noticeable.

Further, in the same song, brand names are flashed in the background when Suman (Bhagyashree) is waiting for Prem to return. Neon-lit hoardings displaying brands such as *Mafatlal* and *Shemaroo* define an emerging cityscape; one that has now become symbolic of consumer culture. Apart from these, expensive foreign cars, American fashion (dresses that Prem gifts Suman) and lifestyle (dance parties, golf, table tennis, fast food) are other important elements of the film.

Finally, we come to the most important transformation that all these elements in the film brought about in Bombay mainstream cinema: the shift of focus from the representation of the middle class to that of the affluent. The film itself is about the marriage of consumer culture (represented by the young, rich and foreign-returned Prem) and the conventional middle class values such as honesty, honour, friendship and hard work (represented by the educated but traditional Suman). Even though Suman belongs to the middle class, most of the film shows her living in Prem's house and therefore middle class living is almost absent in the film.

From this film onwards, the middle class slowly 'vanishes' from the Indian screen. It is interesting to note that a film industry that had been showcasing middle and working class lives, now churns out films repeatedly about the rich and prosperous youth of the country.

### **Rise of a new urban middle class**

The reason for this 'vanishing' middle class was the swell of the migrant urban dwellers and their increasing purchasing power. Various factors led to this phenomenon. In an article 'World Cinema: Bollywood forced to go mainstream?' Iain Ball says -

The highly educated middle and upper classes in India, once embarrassed at being 'westernized' and for speaking and thinking in English, are feeling confident in their sense of identity - and their

language - for the first time. There's a whole audience one can target that wasn't there 10 or 15 years ago. This is a new money class.<sup>[2]</sup>

This 'new money class' is easily visible in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ) and several subsequent films. Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) of DDLJ, being an NRI, is a step ahead of the foreign-returned Prem of MPK. The first half of the film shows both Raj and Simran (Kajol) as NRI kids enjoying themselves in the dreamlands of Europe. Simran's father (Amrish Puri) is in London for monetary reasons but 'his heart is still in India'. He belongs to the landed class back in Punjab and upholds middle class ideals.

The images of consumption that rule MPK are even more prominent in DDLJ. We see Raj and his friends playing Nine Pins at posh game parlours and driving extraordinarily expensive cars. The breakfast table in the film has a cornflakes carton as its central item and Amrish Puri's shop is strewn with consumer goods from daily food items to beer. Western food, travel and apparel are aspects of the first half of the film. Once we get embedded in this matrix of consumable images, we are taken to India with Raj who goes to Punjab to win his lady-love. This is when Raj is shown as an NRI who respects 'Indian' values of family and tradition. He refuses to elope with Simran and chooses to adapt to the traditional family values because he would marry Simran only if her father gives his approval. This is where, once again (like MPK), the hero has to go through a certain struggle to win the Indian heart. He is young and rich and non-resident, and he has to prove that at heart he is an Indian of the trusted kind. Thus middle class values are displaced into the wealthy, and the NRI now becomes the repository of Indian tradition. It is the NRI and/or the upper class family saga that now become the central concern of Bombay mainstream cinema because its main target audience has changed.

The question that now arises is who are this 'new money class'? Where did they suddenly surface from? Amrit Dhillon, in his essay 'No one saves for a rainy day now' says: 'A decade ago the average Indian's consumer choice

amounted to a lumbering Austin or Ambassador and Colgate toothpaste. But an educated population and unprecedented growth in the software and back office service sectors have created a new young and wealthy middle class.<sup>[8]</sup> Not too long ago, an ordinary middle class family practiced frugality and measured expenses - purchasing a consumer good was a major decision; taken after much fuss, discussion, survey and consultation. Today, it's a different situation. We simply walk into a shopping mall and pick and choose television sets, washing machines, DVD players, cameras, watches, etc. The Indian city is characterized by 'busy roads, bright street lighting, neon lights, huge billboards and hordes of frenzied shoppers'<sup>[9]</sup>. The software and call centre boom in the country may result in the production of 'cyber coolies' but the salaries they offer are comfortable for India. Dhillon goes on to write, 'Such salaries are chickenfeed compared with the West, but in India, where the cost of living is low, they go a long way. If Indians are spending more than ever, it's because they have cash in their pockets.'<sup>[10]</sup>

Consumer spending has grown at an average of 12% a year over the last 10 years. It is recognized that the mentality of this new urban 'English speaking' middle class is different - their keyword is not 'save' but 'spend' and with 'easy' loans and promising installment schemes circling in the market, for them purchase has become mundane. This urban population does not save for a 'rainy day', instead it lives for the day. Therefore a new breed of consumers is on the rise in India - 'they are young, increasingly wealthy and willing to spend on everything from mobile phones to sneakers to French fries, and this makes India one of the few hot markets in the world.'<sup>[11]</sup>

This also explains the sudden emergence and dissemination of a certain set of images that not only repeatedly appear in Hindi cinema but also float all around us on television, newspapers, hoardings, posters, etc. and create a matrix, of which we have now become a part. All sorts of consumer items fill the frame - cars, phones, television sets, microwave ovens, designed interiors - and increasingly they became a part of the narrative and sometimes even became the very tools to carry the narrative forward. This

larger trend of media images that surrounds us is an ever-expanding universe of merchandise, shopping malls and the new media, and each, in its own way, 'naturalizes' this image culture.

### **Television and the new home**

The contemporary television scenario in India has also had an integral role to play here. Television is placed in the home and is viewed collectively by the family in domestic surroundings. It is a part of home life and acts as the new family hearth. What is the reflection on the screen of the home?

Contemporary Indian television serials are situated in upper class industrialist homes. They are very much unlike the 'social awareness' serials of the 1980s (for example, *Hum Log*, *Udaan*, *Rajani*) that voiced the insecurities of the middle classes. High society parties, business rivalry, gossip and conflicts in wealthy extended families are the key elements in the new soaps. The display of expensive modern interiors, lavish clothing (usually a mix of Eastern and Western), and consumer goods seems to be their central purpose. Various game shows, like *Khul Ja Sim Sim* on Star Plus, further magnify the presence of consumer items in our lives and work towards creating a 'buying citizen' of the spectator. The desire for these items is humanized and naturalized through television.

### **Emergence of a new romantic form**

Television, of course, had other influences also. On one hand, with mega-serials coming up on television, the family melodrama became hugely popular across India and, on the other, film based programmes such as *Chitrahaar* and *Rangoli* created a pan-Indian audience for the songs of popular Hindi cinema, especially of the romantic form because they showed song & dance sequences from older films (*Chitrahaar*, of course, carried the legacy from *Binaca Geetmala* on radio). At home, the entire family would sit down to enjoy the songs shown on *Chitrahaar*. Be it the elders of the household or the kids; *Chitrahaar* was a favourite with everyone. It showed



songs of the 1950s and 1960s; songs which only the elders of the family had seen in the films of their times. With television, an older generation could share their experience of these songs with their children. Through these programmes, people from all generations and different strata of the society were threaded together by their fondness for romantic Hindi songs. Thus it created a renewed demand for the romantic film form (of which the song and dance sequence is an indispensable part) in mainstream Hindi cinema.

The new romantic form, however, was definitely different from that of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As we have already mentioned, it was definitely not situated in the middle class. The romantic cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s was about the urban youth who spend incessantly on food, clothes and entertainment. As if suddenly, the middle class becomes unimportant for these films to tell their stories. We have seen the demise of a certain kind of cinematically processed middle class - the kind that existed in films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Gulzar and the like. Instead there is a generic split of sorts. The romantic form shows the super-rich whereas the comedies (*Hera Pheri*, *Praan Jaye par Shaan na Jaaye*) or the gangster films of Ram Gopal Varma feature the middle class and the underclass. The comedies are interesting satires of the various inconveniences experienced by the urban middle class in an India that is becoming increasingly globalized. For instance, in *Hera Pheri* the entire plot is centred upon a printing mistake made by the telephone department in the directory, while *Praan Jaye par Shaan na Jaaye* laughs about the tumultuous lives of urban dwellers in a chawl (an urban working class establishment). On the other hand, the gangster films such as *Satya* and *Company*, showcase the urban marginal men and their insecurity. Romance is present in these films too, but it is always precarious and often marginal to the plot. Apparently, romance becomes only the rich man's occupation, and only the likes of Raj and Prem have all the time in the world for it because they do not have to 'work'.

Even though the middle class exists in an enormous number as the principal consumers of these films, it is visually absent in them because it now begins

to identify itself with a different class - this identification occurs at the level of aspirations. Hence the paradox, the middle class can now not be associated with these images even though they could afford these objects or the lifestyle shown in these films. Further, this form now centres around the NRI, reaching out not only to the international Indian fraternity but also to a 'foreign' market. It is difficult to imagine the middle class against this perspective. These films also started the movie-theatre-going trend once again (thus boosting the economy after the dark ages of VHS), especially, with *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, which was not available on video for a long time after its release.

Madhava Prasad, in his essay *This Thing Called Bollywood*, writes about these films:

It is hardly necessary to list them, so widely recognized are these films which, like teachers in Bangalore schools, are known by their initials. They have figured prominently in the emerging new culture of India, where consumer capitalism has finally succeeded in weaning the citizens away from a strongly entrenched culture of thrift towards a system of gratification more firmly in its (capitalism's) own long term control. They have produced yet another variation of the nationalist ideology of tradition and modernity, and, most interestingly, they have relocated what we might call the seismic centre of Indian national identity somewhere in Anglo America.<sup>[12]</sup>

Yet another unique characteristic of these films is the new consumable hero and the images of a male body - as if the body was on display for consumption. This becomes a trend with *Maine Pyaar Kiya*: apart from seeing Prem shirtless in several scenes, we can easily recall posters of the film with Salman posing with only a rugged pair of jeans, while Bhagyashree is all covered up in a *lehenga*. A new romantic hero was emerging who had to meet the criterion of being a desirable body, quite unlike the romantic hero of the 60s and 70s.

This tendency of the male body display (represented by Salman Khan, Sanjay Dutt, Sunny Deol, etc.) came from Hollywood films to Hindi cinema via images of advertising. When advertisements associated the male body with certain commodities a certain boldness to own up to one's sexual fantasies emerged, removing the sense of guilt which had prevailed in female viewership for ages. There was nothing wrong in wanting to see the male body on the silver screen, especially after it had been turned into a commodity: an image that had been produced for the purpose of consumption. Of course it was also the result of a powerful feminist movement of the 1980s and the rise of feminist scholarship that questioned the display of the female body for the 'male gaze'. This emergence of the male body as a consumable image is perhaps also the emergence of a new female subjectivity that is necessarily urban.

### **A contradictory form?**

Coming to the question of the form of popular Hindi cinema, it is doubtful if conflict arises between these consumer images and the highly interrupted film form of mainstream Bombay cinema. The latter has always been easily fragmented such that its dialogue and song-and-dance sequences have, at all times, existed even outside the film itself. But do consumer images really need a medium that flows in a linear causal manner? If we take a look at television, the main form of consumer culture, we realize that it is a very fragmented form itself (with breaks for commercials every now and then and self-defining images characterizing its very language). Thus, in a way, the fragmented narrative and visual structure of the mainstream Hindi cinema are specially equipped to appropriate these images. But having said all that, I wonder if all can be so smooth sailing so as to not cause any conflicts. Contradictions exist, and this marriage of consumer culture and popular Hindi film form is not a perfect one.

On the thematic level, older Hindi film ideology and consumerism may work hand in hand. In *Maine Pyaar Kiya*, the hero can win his love only after he

has toiled and suffered and earned his own living. The same holds true for *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* where the hero will marry the 'bride' only at her father's consent because he cannot defy the existing value system. The possible conflict seems to be resolved in a new manner in a film that came a little later - *Kaho Na Pyaar Hai* (2001), where the 'old-version romantic hero' dies an unnatural death and the young wealthy NRI arrives to fill the gap. He does not win the lady love because he upholds the traditional values or adapts to conventional Indian ideals. On the other hand, he emerges a winner (while the earlier romantic hero loses out) because he is smart, trendy, fashionable, even aggressive. He has all that the earlier romantic hero had, and also money. This is an excellent example where two registers of romance seem to come together in perfect harmony. The new hero does not have to be apologetic about being the 'partying' young man. In fact, that is his very selling point. He is the same old romantic, but in a new avatar.

The idea is summed up excellently by a song from the same film -

*Dil ne dil ko pukaara, lo main aaya milne dobara*  
(Your heart called out to mine,  
and so I have come to meet you again)

Indeed, the romantic hero is back, and so is the romantic film form, but this time it is no more the middle class that holds centre stage. It is the NRI and the young 'English speaking' urban Indian, with the power to purchase and own rather than to dream, who wins the day. Does this then mean that the middle class is soon to lose its decisive role in the context of Indian cinema? Well, perhaps more in its representation on the silver screen the more it asserts itself as the principal viewers of Indian films.

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