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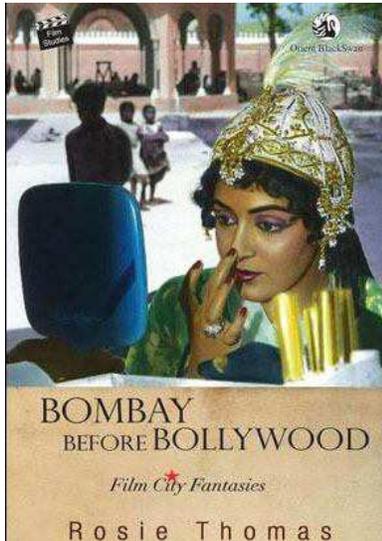
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## Book Review

# Bombay before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies by Rosie Thomas



Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014  
XV+ 325  
Rs 875  
ISBN: 978-8-125-05362-0

Review by  
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‘However, this is in no conventional sense a history of Bombay cinema’ Rosie Thomas writes in *Bombay before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies* (3). Thus, the book, a marvel created after more than 30-year-long research, records her insight into the alternative history of Bombay cinema, and in addition provides a condensed history of subaltern Bollywood and auteurs/actors associated with it. The book celebrates Indian cinema studies that has become an established academic discipline over the past decade and simultaneously cautions us to challenge and complicate certain versions of Indian cinema history that have become fossilized. Rosie Thomas, Professor of Film Faculty of Media, Arts and Design, University of Westminster, UK, inducts a subaltern genre of Bombay cinema in its complexity: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial into the larger framework of internationally acknowledged Bollywood in a space of 10 chapters. Therefore, the book is an attempt to narrate more stories about Bombay cinema with which one can “reassess some of the myths and hazy generalizations that have grown up around its history” (Thomas 3).

The book can be considered as the most recent enterprise of Subaltern Studies. Subaltern Studies was initially conceived as a three-volume series to revise the ‘elitism’ of colonialists and bourgeois-nationalists in the historiography of Indian nationalism (Guha vii). Today, after the publication of ten volumes, the project has achieved a global status. Although, by the end of the 1980s, Subaltern Studies was the most dynamic sector within the emerging disciplines of postcolonial theory and cultural studies in the Anglo-American academy with countries ranging from Africa to Latin America partaking in the

discipline, still it was never used in a full-fledged manner in regard to Indian cinema studies. Thomas becomes a pioneer to implement it in Indian cinema studies. Like the authors of *Subaltern Studies*, Thomas adopted a 'history from below' paradigm or 'bottom-up' approach to contest 'elite' or 'top-down' cinema history writing.

'Bombay' in the title refers to the city and its film industry before 1995 while Mumbai and 'Bollywood' refer to the city and its film industry (which promotes the notion of unchanging essence of Indian cinema) respectively after that point. Discussing the title of the book, Thomas writes:

My title is a knowingly controversial one. At its simplest, Bombay before Bollywood signals no more than that the book's content focuses on mainstream Hindi cinema in the years before 1995 – before the Shiv Sena renamed Bombay as Mumbai and before the moniker 'Bollywood' gained international currency as changes began to take root within India's film industry in the wake of economic liberalization. (Thomas 4)

However, the subtitle of the book "Film City Fantasies" is more straightforward and easily comprehensible. It explores the more popular genres of pre-independence cinema, including a body of films known within the industry as *Arabian Nights* fantasy films, together with their sister genres on the B- and C-circuits, notably stunt and action films.

Zeroing in on key figures such as the brothers Jamshed and Homi Wadia, in this alternative history, Thomas enlightens us on the bipartite structure of the book:

Part one of this book – chapters two to six – takes an alternative look at Bombay cinema history from its inception until the late 1960s. In this account, the focus is not on the socials and mythological, which have been well covered elsewhere and are the basis for most Indian cinema scholarship over the years, but on Bombay's extremely popular action and fantasy films, in particular the films that drew on global popular culture and repackaged this primarily, but not exclusively, for India's subaltern audiences. (Thomas 25)

Furthermore, we are informed:

The second half of the book takes its starting point from the body of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in the Bombay film industry in the early 1980s.... I framed my object of study in three main ways. The first was through an ethnography of the working conditions of the industry; the second was through an exploration of film-makers' own terms of reference about the genre conventions of the films that they were making; the third was through elaboration of a number of other texts – from other films to gossip stories – through which any one film might make meaning. (Thomas 173)

Though cinema technology came from the West, the aesthetic principles of Indian cinema derive from its own theater. These were based on Bharata's classic treatise on theater, the *Natyashastra* (second century B.C.), which called for dramatic action, song-dance, conflict, and happy or redemptive ending – all based on the *rasa*

(essence/emotion) theory. By and by, these four qualities – a) dramatic action, b) song-dance sequence, c) conflict of the good and the evil and d) happy ending with the victory of the good, club together to give rise to the cinema known as mainstream cinema or *masala* (formulaic) cinema. These *masala* films cheerfully toss in several genres – romance, melodrama, comedy, spectacle, action, adventure, according to the permutation and combination of the above mentioned four qualities and conjure up a moral lesson for the audiences to accept and respect. The book complicates this monolithic concept of mainstream cinema and explores the influence of other cinemas on the big-budget *masala* films of the 1970s and 1980s, before Bollywood erupted onto the world stage in the mid-1990s. The author dwells on key moments in this submerged history, including the 1924 fairy fantasy *Gul-e-Bakavali*; the 1933 talkie *Lal-e-Yaman*; the exploits of stunt queen Fearless Nadia; the magical never-never lands of *Hatimtai* and *Aladdin*; and the 1960s stunt capers *Zimbo* and *Khilari*. The book reminds the readers of the old tradition of cultural hybridity once celebrated by Bombay cinema, and how after the 1990s with the eruption of Bollywood, it is lost. The eruption of Bollywood or new Bombay cinema on the world stage is emphasized by Thomas when she states:

In the context of the Indian film industry, the years around 1994 are significantly known as the period in which the old Bombay cinema began to break down and the new Bollywood began to emerge....*Mother India* and *Khalnayak* (The Villain, Subhash Ghai, 1993) are convenient bookends for the classic era of mainstream Hindi cinema: the former was the archetypal Bombay cinema epic of the nation-state, the latter its dangerously twisted transformation, as the nation-state consensus collapsed. (Thomas 274)

Thomas' penchant for cultural hybridity is evident in many chapters in the book. Chapters such as 'Sanctity and Scandal: The Mythologisation of Mother India' and 'Mother India Maligned: The Saga of Sanjay Dutt' highlight a search for lost identity of Bombay cinema in other cinemas. Thomas, on account of her knowledge of the international character of cinema, added a global insight to Indian cinema scholarship.

Indubitably, *Bombay before Bollywood* succeeds in reestablishing Bollywood's link with its forgotten past.

### Works Cited

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