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1	21100201709	Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities	0.313	0.034	0.1	0.271	0.038	0.116	0.061	0.007	0.101

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The Narratives that Made *Sholay*, the Narratives that *Sholay* Made

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Abstract
It has been forty years since *Sholay* appeared. In the meantime, several socio-cultural changes have taken place; cinema has also undergone change. There have been many criticisms and polemical debates about *Sholay* and there has been an attempt to clear some things. The article considers the various borrowings, various narrative conventions that *Sholay* followed. It borrows from the west but adapts them to create a visually satisfying movie. Apart from the borrowings from the western movies, it also follows several epic conventions and the article analyzes them too. The elements that constitute the appeal of the movie are analyzed with reference to several timeless and topical issues which can be seen directly or obliquely in *Sholay*. At the same time, there are many new things that *Sholay* brought in terms of homogenizing and amplifying things. The article also argues that any critique of the movie should be with reference to the oeuvre of popular cinema.

Keywords: *Sholay*; popular cinema; epic; appeal; collective unconscious; narratives; myth; timeless; topical; violence

Sholay brought a change to the Indian cinema and this change is like that which T.S. Eliot talks about in his seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

> "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new" (538).

After 40 years of release of *Sholay*, it has managed to outlive many other 'superhits' in terms of enduring fame. The movie has become a source of unexhausting research for students of Indian cinema and no study of Indian cinema is deemed complete without *Sholay*. Even today, the movie is very much present in the minds of Indians and one can easily find references to it in many cultural artefacts. Recently, Goli, the vada pav food joint chain used a famous dialogue "Ab goli kha" from *Sholay* for its promotions.

What emerged through *Sholay* was not simply a face-lift of a 'spaghetti western' into a 'curry western'. No doubt, movies like *Seven Samurai, Once Upon a Time in the West, The Magnificent Seven, The Wild Bunch, Billy the Kid*), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, North West Frontier, Stagecoach, How the West Was Won* and *For a Few Dollars More* had influenced the scriptwriters, Salim Khan and Javed Akhter directly or indirectly. However, a lot of it, if seen

in a broader and holistic way can be called intertextuality or even pastiche but not blatant copying. Certainly, the Indian audience of 1975, or even later, was not deterred from watching and liking the movie by this history of borrowing. This also confirms that the borrowing was well done, well assimilated to suit the sensibility, the culture, and the times.

Given that masses enlightened to the level of a critic have never been there, and given further that the popularity of *Sholay* had something to do with the contemporary conditions such as the 1971 war, urbanization, economic disparity, growing crimes, lower literacy rate in 1975, etc and their hangover which made people connect to such issues as would be called outdated by a student of social pathology, the popularity of *Sholay* continues even today.

Popular penetration aside, there has been, even recently, quite some polemical dispute about the worth of the movie. While there are many die-hard fans of it, including film critics, there are many others—critics, acclaimed actors, etc—who have denounced it. In an article "*Sholay*: Revisiting an Epic"in *Times of India*, Santosh Desai maintains that there is "no grand theme running underneath the narrative, no archetypal conflict that satisfies deeper psychological needs, and little by way of any re-assertion of clearly held cultural truths that might be under attack, as compared to typical Hindi films, there are no family values that are sought to be upheld, no way of life to be defended, no societal order that needs to be restored." He goes on to complain about the lack of "psychic underpinnings", "issues of the time, as well as with timeless unresolved psychological ruptures", character motivations that "rest at the level of the individual rather than the collective", emotional intricacy etc (10). Nevertheless, these objections, taking the oeuvre of popular cinema in general and of *Sholay* in particular, seem to be sloppily or partially applied, misapplied, missing the point, and therefore, unjustified. Let us see how a well-founded case can be made for *Sholay*.

The earlier movies before *Sholay* featuring bandits such as *Mother India, Ganga Jamuna, Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai, Mujhe Jeene Do, Pathar aur Payal,* and *Mera Gaon Mera Desh* mostly featured bandits as a mixture of force that carried an individual and persona-based significance in the diegesis of the movie and another significance that exploited the viewer's perceived ideas about bandits. Whether benevolent or otherwise, bandits were projected as alternative power centres. *Sholay* continues with this projection but the chemistry of things into which the bandit issue goes is differently created.

What makes *Sholay* so appealing is that it arouses several impulses using the objective correlative of several well-crafted situations in which the emotion is worked out so well that the satisfaction obtained by the audience is immense. This is achieved by theatricality, unexpectedness, surprises, exhibitionism and spectacle, etc. In *Sholay,* the art, spectacle, and drama of cinema combine with that of the epic. What happens in the audience's mind is the arousal of very different responses. For example, while the killing of Thakur's family by Gabbar produces revulsion and anger, the scene showing the killing of his own men by Gabbar produces a certain satisfaction mixed with awe. The larger-than-life nature of the movie takes the wish-fulfillment of the audience at another level and elicits the audience response in the correct, and intense manner whether the emotion produced is vengeance, humor, pity, anger, fear, etc. The emotional intricacy of the movie, like that of an epic, revolves around some central emotions.

On the other hand, the build-up to the larger response involves the arousal of many minor feelings which add up to lead to the larger effect. Again, this is where *Sholay* excels, building the situation carefully, dialogue, gestures, camerawork, and action all contributing to it. This is where *Sholay* is able to harness the tools of cinema. For example, in the scene ending with Gabbar, the

villain, killing three of his men, the scene starts with the camera moving to and fro showing just the feet of Gabbar, and his voice quietly asking questions. It is only when he screams at his men that the camera, as if jerking up, shows his face. Medium and close shots focusing on faces, and long shots at various angles with the ominous music, and the oratorical power of the dialogues of a 70 mm movie with stereophonic soundtrack –something very new in 1975—add to the effect.

Like an epic, *Sholay* connects with the timeless issues that are in the collective unconscious. Good and evil, human suffering, love, revenge, and fear are some such and our subconscious wishes are related to these. One must remember that another movie released in the same year, *Jai Santoshi Ma,* was also a hit and resonated with the audience because of this fact even though one can call it a religious movie. Some of the wish-fulfilments are certainly constrained in a spatio-temporal sense, guided by the perceptions of that time and of the Indian culture. The 'Ye dosti' song for example, was enjoyed by the 1970s audience as a fun filled sequence showing the male bonding between two friends. In later year, however, the percolation of the concept of homosexuality for example, may make the audience see it differently; their enjoyment of it affected.

The plot itself seems to be episodic but this again is something that is a feature of several narratives. Some of the episodes such as the long frolic through the prison sentence or some romantic scenes, leaving apart the songs, are stretched and have little to do with the progression of the main plot That apart, the appeal of such diversions and episodes is immense. Considering that most of these episodes help, if not the main plot of revenge, but the sub-plots and in evolving the characters, they have their use in progression of the plot and in amplification of aspects and effects. For a movie more than three hours long, such episodes don't stand out like painful corns but like jewels studded in a crown.

Sholay carries in its narrative elements of the epic, particularly, the non-literary oral epic and this too makes for an episodic plot. Sheila J. Nayar makes a very valid point when she says with reference to the Indian film industry's attempt to reach the largest audience possible, "an audience with a historically significant percentage of non- and low-literate viewers, and also one not bound by a serviceable lingua franca" that "orally-based characteristics of thought and storytelling would not only make a visual product accessible to the oral mindset; given that they are more elemental, more universal, perhaps even more natural, they would also render a visual product more "readable" to those unschooled in the spoken language of the film" (160). She goes on to say that "oral narratives are…by noetic necessity, episodic, sequential, and additive in nature" and mentions the "various storage spaces" in *Sholay* where the narrative makes use of story-within-story and flashbacks (161).

Again, like an oral epic, *Sholay* establishes the highest good, ordered society, and poetic justice. The delivery of these are assisted by the oral impact of the verbose, graphic, exaggerated in *Sholay.* The oath of vengeance by Thakur or by during heated exchanges by Veeru are of this kind. Such rendering is expressive; the emotional equivalent of the mental state is spoken out, not relegated to pondering or internalizing. The audience finds its mental response (as expected by the auteur) to be spoken out clearly and loudly. It can be understood that the scope of any psychological profundity is thwarted not only by the nature of the characters and setting but also by this texture of orality in *Sholay.* The verbal play, however, is not too figurative but not too colloquially realistic either as we have in movies like *Bandit Queen.*

Sholay does away with the banal, bland reality and thereby takes the audience to unconscious appeal to fantasy. At the same time, larger emotions that are aroused are those that

are aroused more intensely, as in an epic. They are emotions that relate to the common rather than to the peculiar and the particular. This creates a paradoxical situation for the reception of *Sholay*: on the one hand it carries the solidity of its appeal across generations, and on the other hand, many other movies that address the particular, the peculiar, the temporary, may be addressing issues that may be no less valuable or significant though they may not be connecting with the collective psyche and thus, the appeal of such movies may remain temporary or limited. *Sholay* allows 'what I would be' gain upon 'what I can be'.

One can detect several archetypal patterns in *Sholay*. One of them is that of the two nobodies (Jai and Veeru) who rise to the status of heroes with their moral choice and its pursuit and also represent the archetypal quest for identity when they start going from aimlessness and chaos to making stable choices about love, family life, and work. They are also in the line of the anti-heroes coming in Indian cinema in movies like *Kismet, Aawara,* and *Mr Sampat*—a growing acknowledgement in Indian cinema of heroes with shades. One paradoxical feature of the two anti-heroes, Jaiand Veeru, is that they incline to goodness though they are mercenaries, and without fail when they have to take the most crucial decisions. They also represent the mythical hero who brings gifts to the mankind—here freedom from the havoc brought by Gabbar to the villagers of Rampur. Thakur represents the mythical hero with the unhealable wound—his psychological wounds and the physical wound having come with the slaughter of his family members by Gabbar.

Yet, *Sholay* is also related to the topical issues in India, although in an oblique way. This makes issues like exploitation, poverty, want, suppression, religious differences and tolerance etc—all of which are very much present in *Sholay*— at once timeless and topical both. The larger effect of the movie, however, is certainly emancipatory. The spectacle of the movie emancipates the spectator from the topical. This, in turn, serves another function as far as the appeal of the movie is concerned: a better catharsis of emotions and a better wish fulfillment results. Therefore, unlike a conventional epics, *Sholay* depicts a situation of the contemporary times but like an epic its effect emancipates from the triteness of the near and the commonplace reality.

This emancipation can be seen even in the delineation of characters—Jai, Veeru, Basanti, Gabbar, Thakur, Soorma Bhopali etc—all of whom carry their individuality and nuances. Jaiand Veeru carry no antecedents, no surnames either.It was rare for the Indian audience to see the heroes—Jai and Veeru—as well as the villain, Gabbar with no background knowledge about them. This in some way was also a breaking of the family trope, something which has had a strong hold on the Indian psyche. The family stands for the classical and the traditional, as a touchstone of values and morality, and also for control and fixity. The protagonists, the male protagonists at least, do not carry these chips on their shoulders. *Sholay* posits the new and the individual. The two protagonists in the movie are like blank pages, emancipated, ready to lead life according to their choices. They are mercenaries. On the other hand, they work in a moral framework, letting the hand of god (a toss of coin that always directs them to the right path) guide their actions. As a comfort to females, even Basanti is a free, working woman, with little in the name of family to bound her. Like traditional or epic heroes, the protagonists in *Sholay* walk the path of morality.

One important consideration to be kept in mind while critiquing *Sholay* must be that it belongs to popular cinema. Our myths and epics were generally meant for the common public; *Sholay* belongs to the same space. Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai observe: "*Sholay* clearly is not a realistic film; there is very little social specificity inscribed in the film text. The narrative codes employed in the film serve to construct a metaphoric view of Indian society and its manifold problems. A metaphoric representation displaces accuracy and specificity with ideality.

This strategy serves to universalize the problems depicted in the film and give them a pan Indian applicability. Hence, the codes and the general poetics of *Sholay* have to be understood in relation to that heightened mode of social perception and not in terms of some kind of documentary realism (67)

A large part of the common man's life is made up by a subjective grasping of phenomenon. We live in myths, make believe, and escapism for which we need larger than life figures, provided by myth. At the same time, one can notice totalizing, equalizing, and universalizing aspects of *Sholay* as not only the visions of an ideal but also as dilution, and obliviation of realities. This has something to do with the Indian sensibility which one can say after ages of suppression, invasions, want, and unfulfilled desires takes recourse in the mythical, in comfort thinking. This has helped the common man take off his mind from the near and the tangible problems, something popular cinema does. Ignorance feeds on metanarratives and looking at the low literacy levels in India in 1975, the low penetration made by newspapers, television, or even radio, the constrained limits of knowledge of the public in general excluded the outer world drastically, inflated the near world drastically. *Sholay* capitalized on this, filtering out things or making them too big to be related to the daily problems.

A common man reserves a conceptual-symbolical space for Hanuman rather than for Gandhi. At that level, his role model is not Gandhi but Hanuman. *Sholay's* space is akin to that and the lack of deep social context, in a contemporary sense, must be ascribed to this reason. To a lot of extent the movie gives a vision of an egalitarian society that is classless and casteless. And if the drama enacted in the movie involves the strife between good and evil, as in *Sholay,* violence becomes another means of solving problems in the fantasy world. Vamsee Juluri rightly asserts the power of popular cinema in the light of some contemporary realities :

In a society in which class divisions are clear and steep and increasingly intolerable, the class representations of the hero and villain are also clearly etched in the films. The hero is a hard-working, exploited, aggrieved, sometimes even orphaned, man. The villain is rich, powerful and beyond the reach of the law. Violence, like the gun in Western folklore, is indeed the equalizer. (*Bollywood Nation* 77).

Like an epic, there is a dramatic sense of closure, evil defeated. The spectator's mind, thus, questions the issues of power and evil and answers them, helped by the violence shown on screen. Further, the violence results in punishing evil, bringing a moral appeasement thereby. The victory of good seems more appreciable as it comes from the side of the voiceless villagers, and the outnumbered active actants in the action and violence. Jai and Veeru are like Davids to the Goliath, Gabbar, in terms of power and the audience sides with the heroism of the liminal Davids.

Violence as an answer does not come as a straight answer. The moral view that correct means be adopted for correct ends is not followed in *Sholay.* This has also to do with the post-independence disillusionment with the establishment. Prasad talks of the doubling in the movie, of criminals who work on the side of the law and of lawman who takes the law in his own hand and points out: "One of the truly astonishing features of the developing cinema culture of this period is the success with which criminality could be deployed as a metaphor for all forms of rebellion and disidentification" (155) *Sholay* does not make a blatant declaration or use of it; the sympathies of the audience are aroused to such an extent that the criminal duo is 'adopted' and Thakur is given a green signal for his mission by the audience.

No doubt, there is a reworking of the king as the all-powerful, the king-as-god's-representative myth. The king of the diegetic (Thakur) is himself wounded and incomplete like

the Fisher King of the Grail legends. Thakur, with his retirement, becomes not the formal, official custodian of law but its moral custodian, the moral custody sanctioned by the audience's sympathy for him. The moral custody needed to be shown not as impotent but as physical, tangible, and expressed. And that is why it is Thakur who takes it up in the end to physically assault and punish Gabbar.

The narratives of beauty, justice, leadership are enacted by alternative, unconventional sources—Jai and Veeru, the thieves, and Gabbar, the dacoit—who come from the bottom. Although, Thakur taking the help of lower life forms—thieves—is not very unlike the *Ramayana* feature of Lord Ram taking the help of *Vanaras* in his mission. The supposed power wielders—Thakur and Gabbar— are rendered powerless or killed. Though Thakur metes out the final justice, it is merely symbolical (acknowledging the archetypal image of king as agent of god) and the de facto power wielders are the ones from the bottom, Jai and Veeru. As an ambivalent feature, they do not get to retain power; Jai dies and Veeru leaves with his love interest. Power and order are restored to both the legal and the moral custodians and the alternative and temporary centres of power who had colluded with them, for them, their task done, are castrated from power. So, one of the aporias is that *Sholay* does this inversion within the feudal framework where hierarchies and power structures are present. M. Madhava Prasad avers, "…unlike *Zanjeer* and *Deewar, Sholay* transformed the epic formula and its borrowed ingredients into an explicit narrative affirmation of the feudal order and the subordination of the counter-identified spectator's pleasure to the restoration of that order. The central narrative device in this project is the figure of the Thakur, who embodies the unity of the interests of the state and the feudal order" (154).

Now *Sholay* is forty and still going great guns. Priyadarshini Shankar puts it well when she says, "Blending Eastern and Western genre principles and marrying tradition and modernity in a fable-like story that is both happy and tragic, *Sholay* has come to embody the super-narrative of popular Indian cinema" (169). The public has put the stamp of its approval, overriding the ruling given by several critics who swear by certain rules.

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