

All We Imagine As Light': Discourse as Soft Power

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Abstract

In winning the Grand Prix at Cannes 2024, Payal Kapadia's 'All we Imagine as Light' ended a spell of thirty- year drought for Indian cinema in the competitive section. This paper intends to use this pivotal moment to examine issues of cultural import within the larger spectrum of where the film was made ie the East and its validation in the West through the award at Cannes. Considering the Grand Prix as an inflection point for Indian cinema, this paper seeks to explore India's soft power through a focus on media narrative that this film has generated in the Global North. To be precise, texts carried in news and magazine publications of the West, ie North America and United Kingdom will be scrutinised through the lens of Edward Said's Orientalism to read and analyse the discourse around the film.

1. Introduction

When it comes to international scenario, Indian films led by Bollywood are no novice given its currency among Asia, Middle East and Eastern Europe. A commendable achievement led primarily by private agency. However, films produced in India are yet to garner acceptability and circulation in the capitals of North America and Western Europe. Case in point is the famed 2008 production *Slumdog Millionaire*, which went on to secure a litany of awards from Oscar, to Bafta , to Golden Globes and the Producers Guild of America initially failed to secure any official premiere at New York. Despite having a British auteur helming it, *Slumdog Millionaire* had to contend with private screenings.

Interestingly, the auteur P Kapadia herself too has used the East versus West binary to reiterate how Indian language cinema has largely been under the radar of festival circuit (Khomami, 2024). The latter primarily located in Global North focussed in hosting world cinema lends visibility to independent productions. Articles such as 'India Rising: Soft Power and the World's Largest democracy' (Jaishankar, 2018) has cited how India's potential as a soft power remains largely unrealised due to lack of any strategic effort in the realm of culture.

As a cultural export from India, can the Grand Prix winning feature serve as barometer to shed light on the locus of India's soft power vis-à-vis the reception of this film

in the Global North? Can 'All We Imagine as Light' which ended the draught of India's score at Cannes enhance the valence of Indian cinema in the Global North and thus serve as vehicle for acknowledging the country's soft power?

What makes scrutiny of the media narrative around 'All we imagine as light' pertinent is that the film made in a bilingual format of Hindi and Malayalam has been credited with many firsts. The first woman director from India to be nominated for competition section at the Cannes film festival. The first film from India to win the title of Grand Prix at Cannes. Not to mention the first Indo-French collaboration to be shortlisted by the Oscar Committee of France for nomination to the Academy awards. It is even rare, as is the case with Payal Kapadia for a single individual to secure recognition from a coveted institution both for documentary debut as well as feature film debut.

This paper seeks to interrogate this issue on the following lines. To what extent has India's soft power been reflected and acknowledged in the media narrative about a film validated at the Cannes Film festival? Or has it been bypassed with stereotypical images of the sub-continent coming thorough in the commentary? It needs to be underlined that winning an award is as much personal as it is collective, since the country gets represented both as an entrant to the competition as well as the geo locale of the specific cinema in which the plot unfolds. Additionally, what purchase does a highly feted award

bring to the film in terms of circulation and acceptability? This then begets the question what does the festival circuit, located largely in the Global North bring to the table. What does a festival do for films?

Journalists as film reviewers and critics engage in the act of mediation by perceiving a film and accordingly relay their opinion to readers and probable cine goers. What strategies do they use through language to either recommend or can a film? How did the fact about film in focus being a joint collaboration with Petit Chaos, a production company based in France weigh in on the narrative?

It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to explore the media narrative around this film by examining a body of texts originating in the West to gauge whether Orientalism still has purchase or whether narrative about the film by journalists located in the Occident have been able to read the film for its own valence.

Orientalism as an ideology is largely reproduced through discourse which tend to follow a set pattern or standard by people settled in the Global North ie the Occident while giving their perspective or representation of events, process, people and things in the global south ie the Orient (Said, 2016). The frame of orientalism merits consideration as the material of film falls within the rubric of cultural production. A domain that has lent itself and continues to locational interpretation by representatives from the West ie the Occident purposely wearing the lens of Orientalism to gauge and comment upon.

2. Methodology

By all accounts 'All we Imagine as Light' has marked all the boxes in terms of media attention which accompanies an award- winning film at a festival site. In this case Cannes, one of the early pioneers of film festival as an alternative site for showcasing films of different nationalities and not necessarily guided by commercial interests. his research is premised on Bordwell's classification of film commentary into two broad categories (Bordwell, 1989). One the critic and other reviewer with different set of objectives. The former is described as one invested in certain interpretation of the film at hand with compelling arguments about the trajectory. The latter is engaged in a straight forward judgement of the film as watchable, a non- starter and somewhere in-between and accordingly marshals facts to support one's contention.

Body of text under consideration consists of a range of narrative, from reviews to critic's pick to interview based article with the auteur, P Kapadia. Film reviews carried in news publications like The Observer, The RollingStone. Critic's choice by the New York Times and Variety, an interview -based feature of The Guardian and an exclusive coverage by Variety. These texts published out of USA and United Kingdom have been chosen as they are considered to be the standard bearers of the cultural heft of the English speaking Global North.

For conducting the qualitative research, tool of rhetorical analysis is used for close reading of the afore mentioned body of texts and publications. Thrust of a

narrative as well as it's form are considered as key influencers on the readers mind and how they relate to the world. Accordingly, Aristotle's classic three-pronged approach of persuasion, the ethical, rational and emotional appeal have been applied to read the selected texts (Griffin, 2012). The thrust of this research is not to scan or spotlight the commercial versus art debate but how the film under scrutiny 'All we imagine as light' is perceived by journalists and art critics and relayed accordingly to readers and probable cine goers.

It must be stated that subsequently, while the film has secured a series of nomination to prestigious international award titles and has won a few more, this study focusses essentially on media coverage in the aftermath of the Grand Prix award, the second most prestigious at Cannes and those revolved around the film premiere at different locations of the Global North. In terms of duration the considered texts cover a six- month period from late May to November 2024.

3. Valence of Film Festival as a Network

Prior to getting on with the analysis, it is important to locate film festival within the larger equation of the film industry and the complex web of international film circulation and distribution.

Festival circuit by offering a layered opportunity, since its inception in the aftermath of World War II, tend to primarily focus on the value of cinema as a cultural outcome beyond the mere entertainment and commercial interests. Film festival serves three main functions. One it gives an opportunity for showcasing independent production. Second the recognition at such exhibition sites gives traction to the film for a wider circulation not just in developing countries but also in developed markets. Third it opens up access for networking among diverse film fraternity across the globe.

For the newly decolonised countries in search of national idiom, film festivals provided much needed anchor to define and tether their respective nationalism. Evidenced clearly by participants across continents from Latin America to Africa to Asia thronging the festival venues. Consequently, over the decades, a robust network emerged essaying the idea that apart from creative collaboration to secure recognition and accolades, festivals could also realise commercial prospects (Valck, 2007). Cannes film festival founded in 1946, led the practice with le Marche International du Cinema its' film market wing and festivals thus gained traction as a business venue too. The first Indian film to be screened at Cannes was in 1946 with Chetan Anand's Neecha Nagar.

In fact, All we Imagine as Light is itself a testimony to the effectiveness of film circuit as a network for independent artists. It was in the shadows of 2019 Berlinale that writer and director, Kapadia connected with representatives of the French production house Petit Chaos for the project to take off. Like all things during the pandemic, it had to be shelved and six years in between passed before its completion.

4. Analysis

A scrutiny of the five texts under consideration through the tools of rhetorical analysis shows how their respective authors have deployed various techniques of persuasion in a calibrated way.

The emotional appeal of this prize-winning film was showcased from the very word go as headlines are replete with adjectives. The RollingStone foregrounds its review of the film with the phrase “drama about three generations of women is like a sneak attack on your soul”. ‘All we imagine as light is the quiet, surprise masterpiece of 2024’ declared the New York Times headline. Such kinds of assertion are further reinforced with evocative descriptions in the main text. The symbolism of the central protagonist curling up around a pressure cooker received anonymously, while hoping to be from her long absentee husband finds mention. Still others describe the movie as a montage of scenes so emotionally powerful that it ‘pierces the heart’.

In several ways, authors of the reviewed texts tried to establish the film's credibility as a way of persuasion. For instance, the Times critic described the characters inhabiting *All we Imagine as Light* as “real people who sound real”. Foregrounding Mumbai as the director's birth place in the opening lines, the reviewer for Observer tries to establish Kapadia's credentials as an intimate witness to the city thus persuading cine-goers to believe her story telling.

In the practice of film craft, writer & director P Kapadia won accolades from the authors both for the form and treatment of *All we imagine as light*. Particularly, for strategically deploying the documentary format of voiceovers and everyday scenes to anchor the film convincingly in the introductory shot itself. Reviewers and critics alike broadly concur on Kapadia's ability to knit the film together coherently and exhibiting maturity in not overdoing the emotional quotient of the main protagonists. In other words, the workings of logical appeal can be traced in the commendation about the director's finesse in striking the right balance between the characters and the circumstances they grapple with. Kapadia's skilful navigation of the exterior and interior lives of the female protagonists is lauded too. The Observer underlined how Kapadia's sensitive portrayal of the protagonists draws the audience into the drama of their lives.

Prominently absent was a patronising tone even while writing about a sensitive issue like patriarchy, in which the West has definitely made steady progress comparatively in tackling the universal discriminatory practice. Barring the Guardian headline which read ‘The hit Indian film that challenges the patriarchy’ this underlying social issue within the film did not draw much attention of the reviewers and critics.

5. Results & Findings

The accent across the varied texts was as much on the protagonist as the auteur. Kapadia inhabited the reviews through allusion to both her personal and professional journey. Thus, in foregrounding the auteurs own journey and allowing the debut feature speak for Kapadia, the authors have managed to steer clear of an Orientalist gaze and avoid the clichés which goes with such a rigid approach. The commendable reviews garnered by the film in its own right despite its status as an independent production legitimises the recognition earned at Cannes.

In engaging with *All We Imagine as Light*, journalists and critics have subscribed to the complex reality rather than refracting it through their respective opinions. The technique of binaries so effectively deployed in Orientalist discourse has been clearly avoided with Mumbai being referenced as a metaphor for any bustling metropolis integrated into a globalised economy where migrants converge from diverse backgrounds and location to try their luck at living.

No false conclusions or sweeping statements are evident in these textual commentaries. Contrast this to what was mentioned about Mumbai in a Guardian review of *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), in which the metropolis was associated with meting out cruel behaviour toward street children. Comparison with *Slumdog Millionaire* is not uncharacteristic due to few shared commonalities. In both films, Mumbai forms the back drop against which the narrative unfolds. Both films dwell on the experiences of the marginalised living in the city through their respective protagonists. Not least the shared English titles of these two films. In recommending the film, parallels are drawn not just to home grown legends but also international. The critic at Variety summarised how the characterisation of the contrasting personalities in protagonists Prabha and Anu who share an apartment reminded her of sisters in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.

In recent decades soft power has gained much traction around the world as a means of securing recognition and acceptance among different countries through one's culture. The success of ‘All we imagine as light’ in contributing to the enhancement of India's soft power among the cultural capitals of the Global North can be gauged by the film's premiere in several cities across North America and Western Europe. Capitals like London, Dublin, New York etc. Made outside of studio system its independent status notwithstanding This has worked to enhance India's visibility within the cinematic field of these countries, a facet earlier missing.

The Global North led by USA has been exporting their media content products through Hollywood etc across the world, particularly to the Global South. There has been several years where global information flows, including films have far exceeded the global flows of goods and services among countries (Kavoori, 2007). This trend of countries exporting media content at a faster pace than consumer goods has been enabled by innovations in media technology and the ecosystem of satellite, cable television and online communication it engenders.

To the central question of how India is embodied in the description and reviews of the Grand Prix winning film? The image that comes through about India is that of a country on the move, through the dynamic pace of its financial capital Mumbai. Description of Mumbai as a metropolis teeming with life escapes the clichés associated with mega cities as either ‘claustrophobic or cacophonous’.

What we find in the surveyed texts is the pluralistic essence of Mumbai not lost but rather celebrated. For instance, pointing out the multitude of tongues spoken

by Mumbai's inhabitants drawn from India's small towns and villages or how the film is at ease deftly alternating in several languages. Interview based Guardian commentary with the auteur paints a portrait of an India where women equipped with education and felicity with the English language have doors open for them to pursue their ambition. Hinting to a societal change in which family support is not reserved exclusively for men. One did not find an imposition of a monochromatic identity or labels on India. For instance, several of the surveyed texts alluded to how mobile accessibility has brought in engagement with matrimony Apps.

6. Discussion

The narrative structure

The body of surveyed texts have largely steered clear of classifying Kapadia's feature debut from the binary of 'light' or 'serious' film. Instead, the critics and journalist have used the frame of universality for referencing the film. The universal thrust of the film is harped upon across all genres of text which were examined both in terms of theme as well as the treatment. For instance, the Observer review mentions how Mumbai like any metropole attracts migrants from all over the country for eking out a living despite daunting challenges. awaiting them. Or in the words of the Times critic 'how the film is about life's fragility but also of about nurturance'.

To convey the spatial significance of Mumbai in which the film plot unfolds, metaphors of a dynamic pulsating city have been resorted to in these texts. The Observer highlights this through the imagery of commuter trains snaking up and down the city expelling people whilst welcoming them. The metaphor of 'always moving bodies' is deployed by the Times to bring into sharp relief Mumbai's dynamism.

Building up the auteur's personae

Throughout the media narrative, writer & director' Kapadia's presence was pronounced. It was as much about Kapadia's professional journey as about the film itself. In deft handling of the plot's transition from a largely urban setting to a rural ambience, parallels have been drawn to Satyajit Ray's lyrical skills. The Indian cinematic titan whose work was screened at Cannes, while securing a retrospect in 2022.

The reader is made aware of her first documentary "A night of knowing nothing" winning the Golden Eye award at Cannes in 2021. A rare feat of achievement for an auteur to win in both categories, let alone with their debut production. Along this trend, gradually the reader learns how the auteurs documentary technique informs the style and production of All we Imagine as light. Interestingly, Kapadia has been influenced largely by the work of female directors like Agnes Varda's Cleo from 5 to 7 and Chantal Akerman's News from Home.

As a sign of validation for a festival discovery, All we Imagine as Light has been picked up by distributors worldwide, especially those operating in the North American and Western Europe markets. Variety states that the film is poised to garner the highest theatrical distribution ever by an independent production from India. It is in

this background of networking ecosystem among artists, colleagues and production houses that film festivals have come to be described 'as a set of relationship rather than that of organisations. (Valck, 2007).

In terms of limitations, the research has relied only a singular trope Orientalism to gauge the media narrative surrounding the award- winning film. It could perhaps be widened to include quantitative methodology for a more expansive reading of the narrative.

7. Conclusion

In acknowledging the valence of an independent production with adjectives behoving a seasoned artist, embrace of Indian film director is clearly evident. Skilfully interweaving Kapadia's personal journey into the text as if building up a personae behind a critically acclaimed work of Art.

The examined texts lucidly pitches for the Grand Prix winning film's merit and accordingly relays 'All we Imagine as Light' capability to engage with an international audience based in the Global North on its own terms. Skirting the usual cliched reference that India as a country seems to attract or for that matter Indian films as a Bollywood rig morale of song and dance, the media narrative teases out a nuanced portrayal of the country's plurality.

In being premiered across USA and the capitals of Western Europe, begetting consequential spotlight in the international media, All we Imagine as Light serves to signal a wider acceptance of India's soft power.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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