Writing the Angry Young Man: Salim-Javed's screenplays for Amitabh Bachchan

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Introduction
In this paper I want to give a glimpse into an important era of Indian screenwriting and into the work of two of the most important Indian screenwriters, but also to look after the circumstances in society, culture and film production that are influencing the way a film tells its story – not only in India.

The Indian film industry: a heterogeneous manufactory
The way Bollywood organizes film production and therefore the screenwriting process differs significantly from western modes. With regard to Karl Marx M. Madhava Prasad calls the mode of production of Hindi cinema a 'heterogeneous manufactory' (as opposed to the serial manufactory of Hollywood). (Prasad, 42)

The most significant trait of Hindi Cinema is not only the way it tells its stories, but the status of the story itself. Whereas in Classical Hollywood Cinema everything is submitted to the narrative, in Hindi cinema the story is only one of many elements of the film.

The elements of a Hindi film therefore are not integrated as tightly as in Classical Hollywood Cinema, because they are developed more or less separately and are not organised and coordinated by the screenplay alone.

Oral communication is way more important than paper work, film productions start with narrations of the story, the screenplay is not even written at this point. The screenwriter narrates the story to the producer, director and star. The parts of the screenplay are developed more or less separately: one writes the plot (in English), another one the dialogue (first in English, then translated into Hindi), a third person will write the obligatory song lyrics. The composer does not necessarily know the accurate plot when he writes the music scenes. The lyricist may not know the exact situation in which his song is heard. A music number may be inserted into the film after general shooting just to have enough songs for the CD, the music rights having been sold in advance to finance the film. These writers do not work as closely together as we would expect it from our western experience and knowledge. It is not surprising that this mode of production is reflected in the way a Hindi film tells its story.

The first screenwriters who wrote plot AND dialogue were Salim Khan and Javed Akthar, better known as Salim-Javed. The integration of these tasks resulted in an emphasis in dialogue, on dialogic situations. Salim-Javed wrote their most famous and successful screenplays in the 1970s for India's greatest film star: Amitabh Bachchan. The character they wrote for Bachchan, mostly called Vijay (Victory) represents the emotions and feelings in India at this time. Bachchan's "angry young man" as he was called became one of the iconic characters of world cinema.

Goal-oriented protagonist/active agent: the manual's mode of storytelling
Just to remind you: a Hindi film is as a rule about three hours long, has an intermission and a couple of song-and-dance scenes. These basic circumstances as well as the above mentioned specificities of the production process result in a mode of storytelling that differs significantly from western mainstream cinema.

First of all there is no goal-oriented protagonist, no active agent in Hindi cinema. This finding is often misunderstood, so I have to elaborate a little on it: characters in Hindi cinema are not psychologically motivated as in western cinema. They are embodiments of ideas and ideals, they often refer to characters in the two famous Indian epics: the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. There are of course characters in Hindi cinema that are active; there are also ones who are achieving goals. But these characters are not the majority, and more important: a goal-oriented protagonist is not the standard mode of storytelling. To put it in another way: there is a big difference between active characters, even goal-oriented ones in films, and goal-orientation as a mode of storytelling.

Universal principles
Some scholars argue that a goal-oriented protagonist is a universal principal of storytelling. (Hogan, 15) One has to bear in mind that the notion of an individual character, who is able to determine his/her own destiny simply by his/her actions is a very specific one, which comes with the European enlightenment and the advancement of the bourgeoisie. A goal-oriented protagonist is thus the representation of a specific approach to the subject and its abilities. Such an approach contrasts (among others) a more religious one, in which one's destiny depends on the will of god or the gods. If one considers that the philosophical, political and ideological ideas about a subject concept and human individuality depends on time, place and a social group with economic and political power to transport and communicate it, then a mode of storytelling that is based upon a bourgeois, enlightened view of an active agent cannot be a universal principle. To the contrary such a way of storytelling depends strongly on the circumstances in which it is developed.

Back to India: In Hindi films of the so-called Golden Age, from Independence until the early 1960s, there are seldom active agents to be found, and even if a character has a goal, this endeavour is in general not structuring the plot.
The first characters in Hindi cinema that do have a clearly defined goal to be achieved by any means are those played by Amitabh Bachchan in the 1970s. Bachchan's 'angry young man' was a successful mixture of gangster-film, social critique and personal charisma. Most of the characters Bachchan played were proletarians: coolies, mine workers and so on. Although public morals forbade that the Bachchan character wins at the end, he was the perfect active agent of the plot. His actions were propelling the narration forward; he was the driving force.

The arrival of the active agent in Hindi cinema happens in the shape of a proletarian hero, instead of a bourgeois protagonist. This can be explained by India's social development of the 1970s. The industrialization plans of Jawaharlal Nehru produced a growing working class (see Guha), whereas the Indian middle class achieved an economically relevant size only in the 1990s. Classical Hindi Cinema always tried to find the biggest possible audience for its films. Therefore it had an integrating function in Indian society. The Bachchan films of the 1970s were clearly aimed at a

male urban proletarian audience, but they also reached other classes. People who believed in Indian independence were frustrated when the government got itself involved in corruption scandals and their former hopes faded away. In this situation – especially before the background of the Emergency from 1975 to 1977 – an active protagonist on the screen could fulfil at least a few hopes and dreams of this kind of audience, while political activities like strikes or rallies were forbidden during the Emergency.

Case Study: *Deewar*

In order to shed light on the innovations and specificities of Salim-Javed's screenplays for the Amitabh Bachchan films of the 1970s I will use *Deewar* (1975) as a case study and sum up its significant traits.

Overall Structure

Lalitha Gopalan calls Hindi cinema a "Cinema of Interruption". (Gopalan) The intermission in the middle of a film is the most obvious, (but not the only) evidence for this interruption. The overall structure is thus two-part, there is no three act structure in Hindi films, partly due to this 'three hours with an intermission' structure. In general the notion of three acts is one of the most overrated ones in screenwriting research, distracting from the fact that screenplays are written in sequences and films are made in segments. Salim-Javed reduced the number of song-and-dance scenes in their films, which led to a new narrative structure.

In *Deewar* the Bachchan character is the one who follows the wrong path, whereas his brother represents the state, the law and religious righteousness. Salim-Javed are keeping the tradition of using characters to illustrate ideas and ideals, but they give their main protagonist, the angry young man played by Bachchan, enough individual treats and emotions to root for him.

Dialogic situations

Salim-Javed reduced the number of songs and the effect this change had on tradition was a more effective, streamlined storytelling (in the context of Hindi cinema) as well as the creating of "dialogic situations" as Vijay Mishra calls it (Mishra), in which Bachchan's star persona is developed to full effect. Bachchan is the only star in Hindi cinema, which is not related to a (signature) song. His star persona is the first in Hindi film that is based on dialogic situations. Albums of the films with the complete soundtrack were a bestseller in India; fans learned the dialogues by heart. The circumstance that Salim-Javed write their own dialogues obviously helped to integrate this element and give it a greater importance than before. It is hard to understand that dialogue as one of the major tasks of screenwriting had such a low esteem in Hindi cinema, but besides some famous lines from films like *Devdas* (1933, remakes 1955 and 2002) (based on a novel), rhetoric, metaphors, and other literary devices seem to be reserved for lyrics, not for dialogue.

In the most famous scene Salim-Javed wrote, the dialogue between the two brothers in *Deewar*, the protagonist loses this rhetorical battle. Essential scenes are played out in dialogue, not in action or song and dance. In the 1970s this was a novelty, closely connected to the construction of Amitabh Bachchan's star image.

Religion: deus ex machina
One of the greatest mistakes a screenwriter could do – at least when s/he would follow western manuals – is the use of coincidences as a mean to propel the plot. In Hindi films, coincidences are a legitimate device, when motivated by religion. The literary *deus ex machina* is a common device in Hindi cinema. On the other hand, religion is often combined with coincidences. In *Deewar*, Salim-Javed demonstrate the power of faith like any other Hindi film, in a scene, where Vijay is going to the temple for the first time in his life to pray for his mother, who is in hospital. The prayer does its effect, she becomes healthy again. This scene is not used as a coincidence in terms of plot development only. Salim-Javed wrote a "dialogue" between Vijay and Shiva, that represents the character's emotions, his anger, his life-long suffering. In short: the screenwriters still use a traditional device of Hindi cinema, but they integrate it into a more "western" mode of storytelling. The device loses one of its original functions and is used to create a dialogic situation. Vijay's monologue in the temple is of course not a dialogue in the strict sense of the term, but the visual break-down of the scene into shot-reverse shot, as well as the character's belief that Shiva is indeed a person one could talk to, can be seen in a tradition of similar scenes in Hindi films, most notably the dialogue between Radha and Lakshmi in *Mother India*. The difference is significant for the innovations in screenwriting that are associated with Salim-Javed. In *Mother India* (1957) the scene and what follows immediately functions as a major plot point, in *Deewar* the scene is used to show more depth in the protagonist.

Patchwork of minorities
The angry young man persona is always connected to characters, which represent the diverse minorities and marginalized groups in Indian society. These characters – Muslims, Christians, widows, prostitutes, etc – function as "donors" in Propp's definition of the term. (Propp, 39ff) Vijay's fight against the system is thus also representing a broader struggle against a corrupt system.
The ideological subtext of these character constellations may also have something to do with the background of the screenwriters: Salim Khan and Javed Akthar are both Muslims, working in an industry that is dominated by Hindus, but in which Muslim elements as well as Muslim workers (directors, actors, screenwriters, lyricists, composers etc) play a more important role than outside of Bollywood.

Conclusion: Which factors are influencing screenwriting?
Salim-Javed modernized screenwriting for Hindi films in the aspects I have mentioned. Their screenplays are deeply rooted within the tradition of Hindi cinema, and their innovations can therefore be seen as a major evolution, not as a revolution.

In analysing the levels on which they changed screenwriting, one can also detect which factors are influencing the way screenplays are written.
First of all Salim-Javed changed the organization of screenwriting. What was separated before became integrated: the two screenwriters wrote plot and dialogue. They also worked closely with the actor of many of their screenplays, whose star image was constructed mostly by their 1970s screenplays. The way screenwriting is organized influences the mode of screenwriting heavily. Integration of formerly separated tasks leads almost automatically to a more integrated form of storytelling.

Screenwriters cannot ignore the culture and the filmic tradition they work in. Salim-Javed's screenplays are deeply informed by a great knowledge of film history,

including the Muslim social, a subgenre of films within a Muslim setting, targeted at a Muslim audience.

The 1970s films of Salim-Javed react to the political events in India at the time, to the 19 months of the Emergency, the abduction of democracy by Indira Gandhi. These films can only be read properly before their political and historical background.

Screenwriting cannot neglect the basic philosophical and ideological beliefs of a society. Storytelling is connected to these beliefs, which made specific ways of narration possible and successful whereas others remain marginal. A goal oriented protagonist or a melodramatic mode of narration does not fit into any worldview.

Last but not least, the individual creativity, courage, strengths and the skills of the screenwriters are of course essential for the creative and economic success, but they are limited within the contexts I have mentioned.

Looking at the screenplays of Salim-Javed for Amitabh Bachchan, who became South Asia's biggest star because of their screenplays, helps one to get an idea of the factors that are influencing screenwriting. Two points play no role in this complicated web: universal principal of storytelling – because there is no such thing. And manuals: screenwriting manuals for Hindi films just don't exist (until recently) which may be one more argument for the richness and variety of storytelling in India.

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