Social Realism in Contemporary Indian Cinema: A Comparative Reading of Newton and Homebound

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doi.org/10.64643/IJIRTV12I8-191406-459

Abstract—**This study explores the significance and role of realism in contemporary Indian films by comparing Newton (2017), directed by Amit V. Masurkar, and Homebound (2021), directed by Neeraj Ghaywan. Each film delves from the ceremonial approach. Both directors employ a realistic, grounded aesthetic featuring authentic performances and genuine settings to center on the daily experiences of marginalized and ordinary individuals while emphasizing urgent socio-political concerns. This research situates both films in Referencing of theoretical perspectives on cinematic realism articulated by André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, also included the insights from Indian parallel cinema and subaltern studies. Newton examines the challenges of elections rights in a volatile tribal area, highlighting the disparity between stated principles and actual conditions. In contrast, Homebound emphasizes the emotional and financial challenges faced by youth in modern India as they navigate moving, belonging, and their aspirations for the future. To grasp this, the study thoroughly examines film components such as narrative structure, character progression, and audio design. Through qualitative textual analysis and leveraging established film theories alongside the history of Indian parallel cinema, this study contends that Newton and Homebound signify a noteworthy revival of realistic filmmaking in India. This movement disputes conventional narratives and reasserts cinema's ability as a means for social and political examination.**

Index Terms—**Realism, Indian Cinema, Contemporary Indian films, André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer**

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian film industry is famous for its spectacular films, full of drama, with popular stars and lots of songs. This mode of filmmaking has tended to impact our perception of India as well as its culture. The drawback is that it rarely takes notice of the social issues surrounding India.

On the other hand, Indian cinema has also focused on the more realistic aspect. It has sought to showcase the actual problems of common people. This aspect is most evident in the parallel cinema movement that started in the 1950s and ended in the 1980s. The concept of Indian film has been to show the societal problems and the lives of ordinary people, as well as the decisions they have to make under difficult circumstances. This is in direct contrast to typical Indian films, which are generally watched by audiences. More recently, Indian cinema has developed independent films, which have become prominent since 2010. These movies incorporate a new version that deals with current concerns in India, such as wars, economic issues, and social inequalities. Filmmakers in India strive to portray the globe's changing environment and how it affects them. Their movies tackle the current concerns of many Indians, such as disagreements, budget problems, and social issues.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology followed will be qualitative to explore the application of cinematic realism in contemporary Indian cinema. In the present analysis, the two films kept for investigation are Newton (2017), directed by Amit V. Masurkar, and Homebound (2021), directed by Neeraj Ghaweyn. These movies deliberately deviate from the traditional formats followed in the Bollywood film industry. They portray practical storylines, genuine acting, and simple aesthetics, prioritizing reality rather than mere showmanship. Furthermore, the purpose of making these movies spreads beyond mere entertainment to

convey the reality of common individuals subjected to injustice in society.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- The research aims to apply realism theory to examine how realism and social issues are portrayed in the films Homebound (2021) and Newton (2017).
- To highlight socio-political concerns, drawing insights from Indian parallel cinema and subaltern studies.
- It aims to showcase specific films by applying theoretical views on cinematic realism as described by André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer.
- How Homebound and Newton contribute to revitalizing and reimagining realist traditions in modern Indian independent films.

What is Social Realism:

Social realism is a powerful and persistent genre that tells the exact picture of the society and shows the complexity of human life. It offers more than mere entertainment; it serves as an important tool for tackling major social issues, questioning established norms and institutions, and telling the real stories of communities that are often overlooked or ignored. This, therefore, needs a thorough examination of social realism in film and its application in cinema as not only a method of criticizing the society but also as an agent of actual social transformation.(Forrest)

The movie can do unbelievable things, touching and teaching the viewers and making them feel powerful emotions. Social realism provides viewers crucial critical insights that enable them to analyze and relate to the various social, cultural and political facets of our world by accurately and authentically portraying social realities. It provides an important channel to address pressing problems that are often neglected (Forrest)

When looking at the state of society, we can see that there's a myriad of issues that need attention, such as grinding poverty, widespread inequality, racial, class and religious prejudices, rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity, and entrenched systemic injustices that just seem to reinforce the status quo. Social realism, though, is more than just a way of highlighting all these problems. It takes a look at the real human cost of these systemic failures, getting up close and personal with the ordinary people who live through the extraordinary events. (Forrest)

What gives social realism its strength is its commitment to realism, and often employs non-professional actors, natural lighting and location shooting to lend its picture a sense of reality. This method drops us right into the midst of a real-life situation that makes us feel uncomfortable, and by showing the day-to-day struggles of the working class, immigrants, minority groups, and the downtrodden, takes on the sanitised versions of reality presented by mainstream culture. It's basically the voice of reason for society, firing up difficult conversations, demanding accountability, and getting people involved in causes that are going to make the world a fairer and better place.

According to Anurag Kushwah, film makers like Shyam Benegal, Satyajit Ray, Deepa Mehta and Anubhav Sinha show just how important social realism is in cinema. They're not afraid to tackle taboos, put the struggles of the underdog centre stage, and get people talking about justice. They've not just given the artistic world a lot to think about, but also helped to push for change, raising awareness about the things that need fixing. Well-known Indian films by these directors, studied in particular, can be a way to dissect their storytelling, themes and artistic approaches and to understand exactly how they're using cinema to address social issues and bring about reform. (Kushwah)

Shyam Benegal is a name that's synonymous with the New Wave movement of the 1970s, and his commitment to socially relevant and realistic filmmaking. He didn't hesitate to break conventional narratives to take on scathing social issues in his films just like Ankur in 1974 and Mandi in 1983 give a heart-stopping look at the ordinary, often marginalized, people, offering sharp commentary on India's socio-political landscape. (Datta)

Satyajit Ray, on the other hand, is celebrated as a master of poetic realism, and is one of India's most influential filmmakers, and for his "Apu Trilogy" consisting of Pather Panchali in 1955, Aparajito in 1956 and Apur Sansar in 1959 is basically the epitome of this style. A beautiful and poignant coming-of-age

story about a young boy in rural Bengal, who gets to know the intricacies of the human heart and social conditions with rich character portrayals. (Ganguly)

Deepa Mehta is a well known filmmaker who is known for her thought-provoking movies that dissect social norms and throw light on communities that don't get much attention. Her standout films, such as Fire in 1996 and Water in 1905, have ignited intense public debates on the topics of patriarchy, same-sex love, and the way widows are treated in Indian society, and Mehta's films are known for laying bare the social taboos and demanding change. (Jaidka)

Newton and Homebound, made in 2017 and 2025 respectively, demonstrate a new wave in the way of social realism in India. Both films anchor individual stories in the midst of social and historical contexts. All in accordance with André Bazin's idea that realist cinema needs to situate its characters in the physical world. This study is going to take a look at how these films portray the lives of those on the margins and challenge the myths of democracy, progress, and belonging.

Social Realism and Subaltern Studies:

According to film critic André Bazin, cinematic realism necessitates the recreation of reality through extended takes, location shooting, and open endings so that viewers can interact morally with the reality they see. In a similar vein, film critic Siegried Kracauer claims that film's connection to reality aids in revealing social truths concealed in reality.

The dominant storytelling genres in which the oppressed are not typically included or made visible are challenged by Subaltern Studies, which was founded on the study of South Asian history.

Ranajit Guha notes how nationalist narratives erase the agency of subaltern people (Guha 4) , while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously questions whether the subaltern can truly be heard within powerful structures of representation (Spivak 308). By combining social realism with Subaltern Studies, this paper examines Newton and Homebound as films that illustrate marginalization and challenge the limits placed on representation by power, language, and institutions.

You'll notice the stark difference in how it approaches the subject matter to Newton's film, which is characterised by a strong engagement with the political scene, when watching Homebound. Coming from a completely different angle, Homebound chooses an introspective and affectionate way of looking at the world.

The stark difference in how it approaches the subject matter to Newton, which is characterised by a strong engagement with the political scene, on the other side Homebound chooses an introspective and affectionate way of looking at the world. Neeraj Ghaywan's use of stillness and silence as narrative techniques zeroes in on people who are being displaced, moving, and emotionally shattered, and what makes the movie feel real is its portrayal of the everyday struggle and the unspoken yearning. People on the margins of society experience emotional isolation and a sense of not belonging. It aligns with Bazin's notion of realism as a moral commitment to moral complexity and ambiguity. (Bazin 38).

Subaltern studies show that subaltern voices don't get heard because they don't fit the dominant style of speaking. The silence of the characters in Homebound mirrors this idea and, for those people who are hit hardest by economic downturns and social instability, the idea of "home" is an unattainable dream. (Spivak 310)

In Newton and Homebound, it is observed how the indigenous people are not considered part of the mainstream democratic processes. Newton indicates this exclusion and exemplifies how institutional forces may shut the voice that is not heard much. Homebound, on the contrary, has a different view, a young generation trapped in a world of expectation and confusion in the contemporary economic environment. Such young people are not so politically suppressed, but it seems to be a more insidious kind of exclusion that influences not only their emotional health, but the economic one as well. These young individuals face not so much political oppression, but rather a more subtle form of exclusion that affects both their emotional well-being and economic stability.

IV. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

Similar to Newton, which deploys structural oppression as a satire of India's institutions, Homebound expands the social realist tradition within

contemporary Indian cinema by critiquing affective marginalization in its characters through their performance of emotional control.

While the subalterns in Newton are seen but not heard, and the opposite is true in Homebound, the authors suggest that realism may be used as an ethical deployment of representation against the melodrama and also the heroism that is often attached to the lived experiences of people rendered invisible in the mainstream.

Aspect	Newton (2017)	Homebound (2021)
Frame	Wide static shots and long takes give a documentary feel to the film, evoking feelings of isolation, surveillance and the processes through which democracies function.	Its cinematography, often close-up and still, centers on faces and small spaces to evoke psychological realism and the vulnerability of its characters.
Spatial Realism	Real forests and places of polling give testimony to the geographical marginalization of tribal communities by state institutions.	The ordinary home and transitional spaces thus signify instability, displacement, and tenuous forms of belonging.
Character Representation	The lack of heroism and the bureaucracies which surround the characters. The tribal characters are also largely voiceless within these bureaucracies.	Emotionally restrained and economically vulnerable, they convey the current forms of marginality in inner conflict.
Performance Style	Nonexpressive naturalistic acting and expository dialogue support realism's institutional power and established hierarchies.	Quiet, minimalist performances through silences in pauses convey emotional honesty near internal conflict.
Social Situation	It highlights a gap between democratic ideals and realities in conflict zones where democracy appears as a ritual.	Addresses youth unemployment, economic anxiety, and emotional chaos within neoliberal India.
Conflict and Resolution	Conflict remains secured and unresolved, structural inequality and political stagnation persist.	Internal, unresolved, ongoing, and distracting, conflict reflects both financial and emotional instability.

V. CONCLUSION

Both films reflect how Indian cinema is tackling important social issues, both on a big scale and in our daily lives. "Newton" highlights the flaws in how democracy functions, while "Homebound" focuses on the everyday struggles people face just to feel accepted. These movies are influenced by Subaltern Studies, as they challenge common ideas about development and inclusion by shining a light on the stories of people who often go unheard. It depicts that social realism is still an important means to investigate social issues in contemporary India. Newton and Homebound illustrate how the film can act responsibly by reflecting the actual struggles people in the marginalized communities are going through.

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