

Application Of the Rasa Theory of Bhatta Lollaṭa in the Biopic Genre of Indian Cinema.

Saeed Shetty

Abstract—Application of the rasa theory of Bhatta Lollaṭa in the biopic genre of Indian Cinema.

Bhatta Lollaṭa was one of the scholars to comment on the Rasa Sutra. One of the prominent points of Lollaṭa's theory is, 'Sthāyī Bhāva and Rasa is present in the original character and flawless imitation by an actor leads to aesthetic relish.'

Biopic is an emerging genre which has risen to popularity in the last decade. Some of them are based on the living legends such as, 'M.S. Dhoni,' 'Accidental prime minister' on Manmohan Singh, 'Narendra Modi' on prime minister Narendra Modi etc.

As an audience, we know the original character, their emotional, or behavioral traits. We can analyse their looks and can compare it with the actor playing their character. We are aware that certain personalities of today are being aggressively documented in the media. These visual documentations are available through YouTube, news channels etc. When biopics are made on such characters it is easy for the audience to see the original, and the imitational which the actor presents. In the context of such a scenario Bhatta Lollaṭa's theory clearly finds its relevance.

However, when it comes to films based on characters such as Jhansi Ki Rani or Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaja, audience create an image of that person through their readings and visualize these characters.

Researcher is aware, these are not sufficient criteria to experience Rasa - aesthetic relish, but the theory of Bhatta Lollaṭa in some way can be applied to the Indian contemporary cinema, primarily related to the genre of biopics.

Index Terms—Relevance of Lollaṭa's Concepts in Contemporary Biopic Films

I. CONCEPT 1: INHERENT RASA IN THE PROTAGONIST

Lollaṭa's first concept suggests that Rasa (aesthetic relish) is inherently present in the original character. This principle aligns closely with contemporary biopic trends, where the chosen protagonist's life is rich with emotional highs and lows, often marked by a journey from adversity to extraordinary success. The inherent emotional depth of such stories enhances their potential for audience engagement.

Several Biographical Films Exemplify This Phenomenon:

1. M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story – The film portrays the life of Mahendra Singh Dhoni, a cricketer who emerged from humble beginnings to become a global sports icon. His struggles and triumphs evoke inspiration and nostalgia, particularly through the recreation of India's World Cup victory, which is deeply ingrained in public memory.¹

2. Bhaag Milkha Bhaag – Depicting the journey of Milkha Singh, the film chronicles his traumatic childhood during the Partition, his military service, and his eventual rise as an internationally celebrated athlete. The narrative resonates deeply due to its compelling blend of personal tragedy and sporting excellence.²

3. Neerja – Centered on flight attendant Neerja Bhanot, this film juxtaposes her personal struggles, including an abusive marriage, with her extraordinary bravery during a hijacking. Her self-sacrificing act, which saved many lives, allows for Sādhāraṇikaraṇa

¹ <https://youtu.be/LkBmh0s-7P8>. 75% people liked this film as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

² <https://youtu.be/7oEHU51BzKA>. 75% people liked this film as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

(universalization of emotions), making her story deeply impactful, her actions lead to Vīra Rasa, as an audience, they can relate with valour, and her bravery deeply.³

From these examples, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Protagonists in biopics are often well-known figures from politics, sports, or entertainment.

Their lives are either extraordinarily successful or highly controversial.

The narrative arc typically follows a transformation from an ordinary existence to an exceptional one.

Extensive media documentation provides a rich source for storytelling.

II. CONCEPT 2: FLAWLESS IMITATION BY THE ACTOR

Lollaṭa's second concept emphasizes the importance of precise imitation in performance. In contemporary cinema, this aspect is particularly relevant, as popular figures have their physicality, speech patterns, and emotional expressions well-documented across various media platforms. This availability of visual and auditory material enables audiences to critically assess the authenticity of an actor's portrayal.

Notable Examples Include

1. Thackeray – The biopic of Balasaheb Thackeray, a politician known for his oratory skills and commanding stage presence, benefited from extensive audiovisual material available on platforms like YouTube. Actor Nawazuddin Siddiqui successfully captured his speech patterns, gestures, and demeanor with remarkable accuracy.⁴

2. Sanju – Chronicling the turbulent life of actor Sanjay Dutt, this film demanded an accurate replication of his distinct gait, slang-infused speech, and carefree attitude. Ranbir Kapoor's meticulous performance demonstrates how attention to these details enhances credibility.⁵

³ Neerja – JioHotstar 100% people liked this film as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

⁴ https://youtu.be/Sq6fYt_lv2M. 20% people liked this film. as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

3. The Dirty Picture – Based on Silk Smitha, a controversial actress from the South Indian film industry, the film required the lead actor, Vidya Balan, to physically transform for the role. She adjusted her body language, voice, and even her physique to align with the original persona.⁶

Key insights from these examples include

A substantial amount of reference material is necessary for accurate imitation.

A skilled actor can achieve Āṅgika (bodily expression), Āhārya (costume and makeup), and Vācika (speech) Abhinaya effectively.

Casting plays a crucial role, as the actor's physical features (height, body type, facial structure, voice) should closely resemble the original character.

Tough imitations can create impact but imitation alone is insufficient; emotional depth and context are essential for evoking rasa.

Lollaṭa's theoretical perspective on rasa pertains to its locus. According to his interpretation, Rasa originates from real-life Sthāyi bhāvas (permanent emotions), which are intensified through Vibhāva (determinants), Anubhāva (consequent expressions), and Vyabhičārī bhāvas (transitory emotions). This framework suggests that the foundation of Rasa lies in lived emotional experiences, which, when heightened through theatrical devices, become aesthetically relishable.

In the biopic genre, the original character, their life experiences, and emotional depth are all rooted in reality. However, these elements undergo a process of dramatization, wherein real-life emotions are stylized and presented in a manner that makes them engaging for the audience. The transformation from real to reel allows viewers to experience these emotions vicariously. In actual lived experiences, an individual does not necessarily derive aesthetic pleasure from emotions such as sorrow or disgust. However, when such emotions are portrayed on screen by an actor, the audience can empathize with them, recognizing the

⁵ https://youtu.be/eCX_qrnjF9Q 41% people liked this film as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

⁶ The Dirty Picture - JioHotstar 100% people liked this film as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

distinction between reality and its artistic representation. This process often leads to a re-engagement with emotions that the audience themselves may have encountered in their own lives. While Lollaṭa's theory appears theoretically applicable to the biopic genre, the actual experience of Rasa remains a more intricate phenomenon. Empirical evidence suggests that while certain biopics resonate deeply with audiences, others fail to achieve the intended aesthetic effect. For instance, the film *Azhar*, based on the life of the cricketer Mohammad Azharuddin, struggled to evoke Rasa due to actor's lack of resemblance to the real-life figure and a weak screenplay, leading to Rasa-Vighna (obstruction of rasa experience).⁷ Similarly, *The Accidental Prime Minister*, which depicted the political decisions of former Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, did not achieve mass appeal. The absence of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* (universalization of emotion) likely impeded audience engagement.⁸ Furthermore, there exist instances where the biopic framework is adapted to narrate real-life events, yet the central focus is not on an individual protagonist but rather on the larger socio-political or historical context. In such cases, the effectiveness of Rasa realization depends not just on the depiction of the protagonist's emotions but also on how the event itself is aesthetically framed within the narrative structure.

III. NARRATIVE-CENTRIC ANALYSIS

The film *83* (2021), which dramatizes India's historic 1983 Cricket World Cup victory, adopts a narrative-centric approach that foregrounds the collective journey of the team. While individual players are acknowledged, the central emphasis lies in the unfolding of events and the team's cohesive response to adversity, thereby positioning the story itself as the primary focus.⁹

Lollaṭa's theory presupposes the presence of a referent grounded in the visual and performative registers of

mass media. This becomes problematic in the case of historical figures like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Rani Lakshmibai, or revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh and Sardar Udham Singh, whose representations are constructed primarily through literature, folklore, and nationalist discourse rather than visual documentation. Consequently, audiences rely on imagined reconstructions, making it difficult to evaluate the authenticity or fidelity of an actor's portrayal through mimetic standards.

IV. TO CONCLUDE

In present-day cultural settings where public figures are extensively mediated and their identities curated across platforms, Lollaṭa's theory offers an interpretive lens that accommodates the audience's intimate familiarity with the performer. This pre-knowledge shapes aesthetic reception, suggesting that Rasa can be intensified by the recognition of the performer's lived identity

1. Protagonist as Vibhāva:

In the context of biopics, the protagonist often functions as the Vibhāva, or the primary stimulus for emotional engagement. The narrative structure centers on the protagonist's journey, wherein their actions and decisions serve as causal agents that shape the storyline. The documentation of these events and actions constructs the foundation of the biographical narrative, positioning the protagonist as the central aesthetic trigger.

2. Audience's familiarity with Sthāyibhāva:

Given that biopics often depict well-known personalities, the audience is typically already acquainted with the protagonist's dominant emotional traits or Sthāyibhāva. These emotions have often been experienced contemporaneously by the audience, thus enabling a shared emotional memory. This pre-existing knowledge allows the viewer to empathize

⁷ <https://youtu.be/ePRNBmz-jP4>. 22% people liked this film as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

⁸ https://youtu.be/H7JqAM8_Qeo 20% people liked this film as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

⁹ *83* - JioHotstar 80% people liked this film as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

deeply, facilitating a more immediate and resonant emotional connection.

3. Mimetic representation through Abhinaya:

The dramatization of a living legend's life involves the actor embodying the subject through various expressive techniques, primarily Abhinaya. The actor reconstructs the character's lived experiences, employing gestural, facial, and vocal nuances to reproduce not only the character's actions but also their internal emotional landscapes. This process relies heavily on mimetic fidelity to evoke Rasa.

4. Constructed narrative for aesthetic impact:

Biopics rarely adhere strictly to factual representation. Instead, filmmakers employ creative liberties to enhance narrative cohesion and emotional depth. This construction of a compelling story arc—interspersed with dramatic high points—serves to heighten aesthetic engagement and facilitates the potential for Rasānubhava (aesthetic experience).

5. Media documentation as a referential tool:

The extensive media documentation of living legends serves a dual purpose. For actors, it provides critical visual and behavioural references necessary for accurate imitation. For audiences, it offers a comparative lens through which to assess the actor's performance. The presence of such archival material increases the potential for authentic representation and subsequent emotional resonance.

6. Shared collective memory and emotional resonance:

Certain real-life incidents depicted in biopics exist not only in the memory of the protagonist but also within the collective memory of the audience. This shared recollection can significantly intensify the emotive impact during viewing. For instance, in the case of Neerja, viewers' existing emotional investment in the real-life event enhances their empathetic response to the dramatized version.

7. Criticality Of Appropriate Casting:

Casting choices play a pivotal role in the aesthetic reception of biopics. Disparities in physical appearance, demeanor, or affect between actor and original character may disrupt the viewer's immersion, resulting in Rasa-Vighna (obstruction to aesthetic experience). While films such as Mary Kom received critical acclaim, misalignment in casting was cited as a factor that diminished its initial emotional authenticity.¹⁰

8. Temporal And Generational Limitations of Biopics:

Biopics are often temporally anchored to specific socio-cultural contexts. While the protagonist may be a figure of significance in one era, their relevance may diminish over time. The next generation might lack the contextual framework or emotional investment necessary to engage with the narrative, leading to decreased interest and potential failure in generating Rasa.

V. CONCLUSION

In the evolving landscape of contemporary storytelling, biopics represent a unique intersection of lived reality and artistic representation. The portrayal of living legends whose identities and emotional trajectories are well-documented and widely recognized demands a nuanced application of aesthetic theory. Lollaṭa's interpretation of Rasa theory, which emphasizes the direct stimulation of emotions through the presence of vivid Vibhāvas, offers a particularly fitting framework for analyzing such narratives. The familiarity of the audience with the protagonist's Sthāyibhāva, the availability of media documentation, and the dramatization of real events all contribute to the potential for aesthetic immersion. However, elements such as casting choices, generational dissonance, and narrative liberties can either enhance or hinder the evocation of Rasa. Thus, while biopics hold immense potential for emotional engagement, their success in generating aesthetic relish is contingent upon a complex interplay of authenticity, representation, and audience reception.

¹⁰ <https://youtu.be/XUG08b4A-mY> 80% people liked this film as per Rotten Tomatoes – a review aggregation website for films.

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