

---

# Dream Machine: Realism and Fantasy in Hindi Cinema

Written by Samir Dayal  
Temple University Press, 2015

Reviewed by Amber Shields

Hindi language cinema, taken here as not only the dominant industry within India but also Indian diasporic cinema, presents an area of growing interest for scholars around the world not only looking to understand the fascination of this vast production, but also how it can be read to understand the nation itself. In his new work *Dream Machine: Realism and Fantasy in Hindi Cinema* (Temple University Press, 2015), Samir Dayal proposes to investigate Indian identity both in the nation and abroad through Hindi cinema. Acting as a “mirror and lamp”, these films, he argues, not only reflect “Indianness”, but also shape it (1). His readings thus propose to offer both insight into the “dream machine” and its techniques in shaping an identity and the identity that it shapes.

Though not out of place among other national oriented cinema texts that look to how cinema contributes to individual and collective identity, the premise and range of the book is an ambitious pursuit as even on the surface India presents a complex case study. Its creation into a nation state in 1947 after a period of colonial rule was marked by the violence of partition that has had a great affect on identity images. Questions of religious and national tensions, citizenship, gender, terrorism, modernity and tradition, tremendous disparity, and large diasporic communities are all issues that have continued to be at the centre of debate in discourses on Indian identity and are all touched upon in Dayal’s readings.

While all important factors in identity, and his readings of selected films do offer some interesting insights into how they can be read in terms of their “Indianness”, the scope of identity is so broad and assumptive of a certain language, class, etc. that it is overwhelming and in the end offers more questions as to how one must define and specify an identity as opposed to enlightenment on any particular identity. This feeling is fortified in the conclusion whose turn to more identity theories in the final pages leaves the book with the unsatisfactory ending that seems to be rather the beginning of what the work was trying to explore.

In connecting these disparate films and the social issues and identities they represent, Dayal offers the overarching framework of reading the use of fantasy in juxtaposition to the more realist diegsis in these films. In

---

his introduction, Dayal is insistent on how his focus and sustained inquiry into this question of fantasy distinguishes his work from other respected Hindi cinema scholars such as Vijay Mishra or Lalitha Gopalan. His defence of his approach, however, subsumes his argument, which at the end of the introduction is still in its own hazy dreamlike state. As a scholar interested in the uses of fantasy in cinema, the lack of development of this argument not only in the introduction but throughout the book was a disappointment; Dayal proposes to follow this separate path but is perpetually distracted by other avenues of discourse.

Going through his examples of the *Angry Young Man* or the *Terrorist*, Dayal offers several examples of films that are read to show how they mainly mirror, and in some cases perhaps shed light on, the issues at stake (in the case of the terrorist film this can be seen as the double desire to both “neutralize or redeem the terrorist by undermining his or her ideological ‘cause,’ and simultaneously prove the superiority and liberality of Hindu ideology”(103)). In these readings there are references to the alternative “fantasies” that these films present, however these references are never fully explained. It is taken for granted that, as film, they are depicting some type of fantasy, yet what these fantasies depict and how they are articulated is left vague. This lack of critical engagement highlights the danger that the use of fantasy presents being that, as a hard to define term, it can be used to describe anything that exhibits some element of the imagination, lending all fiction to this definition.

In lieu of readings of fantasy, the chapters are more organized around particular themes such as citizenship and patriotism. This turn to issues or categories can make some of the readings repetitive; for instance, the section on the *Avenging Women* films turns into a detailed description of the similarities of plots between several films (which is in itself interesting to see the pattern), but the lack of analysis makes the section overall superficial. Further the intense focus on different issues regarding identity as opposed to the elements of fantasy which is purported to be the common thread of the book leaves the readings of vastly different films, ranging from classic Hindi-language films like *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) and *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975) to the British *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008), disconnected.

When these readings of the fantasy are elaborated and focused, they prove insightful studies of this element. Dayal’s reading of fantasy in *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) focuses specifically on how the fantasy of interracial coexistence is elaborated through the love story and, more specifically, its enactment through fantasy song and dance scenes. Spending the time to analyse these

---

scenes as opposed to overburdening the analysis with a hurried reading of the whole film offers the relief of clarity and a well-elaborated argument that demonstrates the value of this reading that doesn't necessarily come out in others.

Dayal's conclusion that "Indianness" is malleable and unfixed serves not only to describe this broad concept of identity that has appeared in widely different contextual and theoretical forms throughout the book but also to describe the work itself. While this allows for the exploration of several factors, it leaves the overall book overwhelming and fragmented and the feeling of unrealized potential.