

Trends and Themes in Pakistani Cinema



Abdul Fatah Daudpoto*

Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Pakistan

Abstract

This piece of research is largely related to the history, art and especially to performing arts and cinema in Pakistan. This research work aims to provide an understanding of the trends and themes in the Pakistani cinema, how it has evolved, and what kind of trends and themes have been adopted. It is also discussed how many films were released and what sort of genre/themes these were based around.

Cinema in sub-continent

Pakistan emerged as a sovereign state in 1947; but the roots of its performing arts and culture have a common background with what was known as the subcontinent of India. Cinema to, in this context, developed through the collective endeavor of entrepreneurs of the entire region. Whilst tracing down the historical development of the visual medium known as film, cinema or movies, one gets to know that the phenomenon of moving pictures was noted by scientists in early 19th century. Later, in the research and development of Thomas Edison; The Lumière brothers of France were the first to do a public screening of their short film in Paris at Grande Café, in December 1895. Thus what we call cinema, the most wonderful of all entertainment arts, was born in 1895. The following year, the Lumier brothers brought the show to India and held its premiere at the Watson Hotel in Bombay on 7 July 1896. From 18 July 1896, films were released at the Novelty Theatre on a regular basis¹. That was how cinema came to the subcontinent. Soon after, other major cities, including Lahore, had their first brush with the new invention and were listed in the film distribution territory. Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (1870-1944) affectionately called Dada Saheb Phalke is considered as the 'Father of Indian Cinema'.

* Abdul Fatah Daudpoto, Assistant Professor, Centre of Excellence in Arts and Design, Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro, 76062, Sindh, Pakistan

Phalke, with his imported camera, exposed single frames of a seed sprouting into a growing plant, which resulted in the first indigenous 'instructional film' in 1912 and name of film was '*The Birth of a Pea Plant*' (Raja dhyaksha, 1994: 233).

Inspired from an imported film "*Life of Christ*" Phalke started mentally visualizing the images of Indian gods and goddesses. He fixed up a studio in *Dadar* main road, wrote the scenario, erected the set and started shooting for his first venture *Raja Harishchandra* in 1912. The first full-length story film of Phalke was completed in 1912 and released at the Coronation Cinema on April 21, 1913, for special invitees and members of the Press (Baburaj, 2008). This first feature film of subcontinent had style of the Indian folk theatre and the primitive novel. Sarcastically when Dada sahib cast characters role for his films, he didn't get any woman willing to act in front of camera and thus the first heroine for Indian film was not a female but a young boy named *Salunke* (Baburaj, 2008) who acted as *Taramati* the wife of *Harishchandra*. According to the analysis of this film there was a bathtub sequence in the film, where *Harishchandra* comes to call his wife *Taramati*, who is in the tub; with her fully drenched attendants is indeed the first bathtub scene in Indian cinema. All the females in their wet sarees and blouses clinging to their bodies are in fact all males in female grab. Thus the start of feature film in subcontinent was inspired by the representation of gods and goddesses, and depicting stories from mythology, thus including the use of costumes, makeup, drama, songs and dances, which are essentials as described in *Natyashastra* (Rajadhyaksha et al, 1994). At that time the city had nine cinema houses mostly showing films from Bombay and Calcutta besides movies produced in Hollywood and London. It was the time when a group of young film enthusiasts from Lahore's *Bhati* gate involved them in film production.

In Lahore, Mohni road's Mian Abdur Rashid Kardar and *Bhati* Gate's M. Ismail could be regarded as the names among the pioneers of cinema in Lahore; both were professional calligraphists who also prepared posters and paint boards for silent films occasionally. A. R. Kardar, leading activist belonged to a landed family of Punjab. He went to Bombay to learn the technique of filmmaking. He did odd jobs as a painter and a still photographer for many under production films, started filmmaking in this city, which was later to become Lolly wood; but G. K. Mehta, a railway accountant, may thus be regarded as the first filmmaker of Lahore (Gazdar, 1999)

A. R. Kardar and M. Ismail sold their belongings to set up a studio and a production company under the name of United Players Corporation in 1928. They started to make a film "*Aka Husn ka Daku*" which was released little late in 1930. In the early thirties, the silent Indian cinema began to talk, sing and dance. Imperial Film Company produced and released a film on March 14, 1931 was the first Indian cinema with a sound track. "*Alam Ara*" was the film and it was produced by Ardeshir Irani. In Lahore this film was released in Capital cinema, which was owned by Hakim Ram Prashad (Rayadhaksha et al, 1994). A film historian described the scene as, "In 1932, Jaswant Singh established Punjab Studio and started the

activity of film production. In 1935 Malika studio was founded by Roop Lal Shori and after 1937 Lahore saw almost no activity in film production. Film centre of Lahore came under threat as most of the film people rushed to Bombay and Calcutta.

Cinema in Pakistan

The partition of sub-continent into two independent states - India and Pakistan, caused irreparable damage to film production in Pakistan. Most film producers were Hindu in pre-partition era and the film city was Lahore. As the city fell to the side of the Islamic state of Pakistan, filmmakers migrated to India. This deprived Lahore film circles needing much investment and expertise in film production and distribution. Fortunately, a number of talented Muslims who have established themselves in Bombay's film circles, moved back to Lahore, amongst them was film producer Syed Shaukat Hussain Rizvi, his wife, actress and singer, Noor Jehan, actress Swarn Lata, actor Nazeer, director W.Z. Ahmad, Luqman and Sabtain Fazli, music directors Feroze Nizami and Khawaja Khursheed Anwar. These creative artists laid the foundation of the Pakistani film industry and were also responsible for producing some of the best films ever made in Pakistani Cinema. The first film given by the Pakistani film industry was "*Teri Yaad*" which was released on 7th August 1948, with Asha Posley and Nasir Khan in lead roles (Gazdar, 1999). In this early phase of film industry, the most unforgettable and versatile films were produced. Most of the filmmakers were the ones who already had started their careers in film industry in Bombay. With the limited resources and budgets one of the most memorable films were produced in this era here in the Pakistan.



Figure 1, left: Asha Posley in "*Teri Yaad*" released on 7th August 1948

Figure 2, right: Swarn Lata, actress in *Pheray* (1949) & *Do Ansoo* (1950)

But, entirely, the Pakistani cinema in its whole history lost versatility in the films. The long marshal law and military rules created hard censorship and dictation on the film producers. Any academy or institution for training in acting, camera work and technical support were not established by the Government; nor were any steps taken by the public for the growth of

film industry. Military rule tightened a hard robe for producers, directors and workers. The law and order situation always being worst in those times and the public always felt harassed to view the films in the cinema halls. Therefore the film industry started to produce the films only for cheap entertainment, which created the situation of conversion of cinema halls into shopping plazas all over the country.

Trends and themes of Pakistani cinema

All over the world, the most powerful source for success of films is due to the diversity and strong scripts of the films. In Pakistan, films have been produced on many topics i.e. music, romance, traditions, folk, patriotic and on themes of social life of the region. Overall in the history of films in Pakistan, the light musical films with very gentle soft romantic atmosphere and emotional dramas were incorporated with musical scores. As a tradition of subcontinent, music is the core reason for the success of the films thus it has also taken much part in many films. Not only the twisting and gripping scripts were the attraction for the viewers to the cinemas but also the music numbers of these films are highly appreciated. Also, in the history, many of the films were hits and super hits, not only because of script and direction, but music direction also played a key role for the success of those films.

One of the lacking topics, after the partition, of the film industry was lack of films on the political and social issues of nation rebuilding. But a favorite topic for producers and directors was romantic films; to provide people with a balance of entertainment with critical dramatically situations incorporated with musical scores. According to the genre of music, these scores were classical, light classical, folk and situational or composed songs. The situations where the music was a necessary element in these films was mostly for the expression of love and fulfillment, tragedy, sorrow or longing for love songs, *Mujras* or party songs (Iqbal, 2009). However other trends and characteristics can be identified through the years, which can help to divide the film industry into various eras. The following table describes very briefly the various eras of the Pakistani film industry and main themes and trends associated with that era, with particular emphasis on the characterization of women.

No.	Period	Theme	Representation man characters
1.	1948 to 1959	Melodramas	Romanticized.
2.	1960 to 1969	Melodramas	Emotional and expressional
3.	1970 to 1979	Social and family oriented themes	Emotional and expressional
4.	1980 to 1989	Family oriented themes and Violence	Glamorous and sensual
5.	1990 to 2004	Violence and romance	Sex objectivism

Table 1: Themes and trends of Pakistani film industry



Figure 3: Posters of first decade films in Pakistan with emphasized representation of women, romantically, patriotic and with a better vision.

1948 to 1959

50 Urdu and 45 Punjabi films were released, while 16 Urdu and 10 Punjabi films were super hits, mostly the viewership was in Punjab but also Karachi was a big industry for the business of the films. The first ever super hit in Pakistani cinema was a Punjabi film called “*Pheray*” in 1949, whereas “*Do Ansoo*” was the first super hit in Urdu films which was released in 1950 (Gazdar, 1999).



Figure 4: Posters of first decade films in Pakistan with emphasized representation of women, romantically, patriotic and with a better vision.

In the storylines of these early films the female character had the lead role as the heroine, naughty side heroine, as friend, mother, one sided lover, and dancer, for an example the film *Roohi* 1954, sex worker, *Neend*, 1959, *Koel* 1959. One of the critical roles played by any female artist in this era was by Mussarat Nazir in 1957 film, “*Yakke wali*”. She was represented as a woman who had to disguise herself as male to find herself work. On one hand this film showed a character of a strong woman who is willing to face the outer world bravely, but on the other hand it emphasized on the notion that it is impossible for a woman

to work freely due to her sex and for the sake of work she can't survive if she is a woman in community, thus disguising herself as a man. Noor Jahan was the most popular heroine of this time. Whereas Sabiha, Musrrat Nazir, Shamim Ara, Nayyar Sultana and Bahar were equally popular in Urdu and Punjabi films, Neelo was introduced in 1956. She played many lively and naughty characters, later she had much more exposure performing in dance numbers in the films. After partition in 1954, for the first time, the Government of Pakistan banned a film "Roohi". In this film there was story of a married elite class lady who loves other than to her husband; therefore the Government banned the film because it cannot be allowed that a married woman is to love a person other than her husband. This was one of the most technically sound films of that era, banned and was kept forever in box (Goreja, 2003).

1960 to 1969

From the 1960's onwards there was not much change in the trend of films, as far as direction and musical excellence was concerned, but in the mid 60's there was an apparent shift of the themes of these films from musical romance to more family oriented films. During this time 442 Urdu films were released, and 29 of them were considered as super hit films. Super hit Punjabi films were 14 out of a total 158 Punjabi released films in this time. In 1961 the first Black and White film with colour songs was released, which was "Gul Bakaulee" (Iqbal, 2009). According to Masood Haque in his article about Pakistani directors he bluntly says, "...there was no force more destructive than a wayward woman." Women who challenged the status quo by refusing to abide by its rules were subjected to sexual humiliation and violence and often paid for their subversion with their lives.



Figure 5: Posters of films from 1960 to 1969 with same representation of last decade with little change of themes from romantically, musical and family orientation

Arguably these themes were not limited to work and were in fact ubiquitous in Pakistani cinema, although in Shabab Studio films these themes were pervasive and pursued with a relentless zeal.

1970 to 1979

In 1970 the first Pushto film was released which was “Sher bano”, Yasmin Khan was the first heroine of Pushto films. In this year 5 Pushto films were produced, and later, in the next 9 years, 55 films were released which gathered a large number of audiences not only in Punjab but also in the cinemas of Karachi. On the other hand the success rate of Urdu films was the highest throughout this era. Out of 409 films 51 were super hit films, whereas in 453 Punjabi films released, 34 made their way to the box office as super hit films. Rani was the mostly successful heroine of this era, along with Zeba, Babra Shareef and Nisho. Much of the trends and themes of this era’s films was in continuation from the 60’s theme of family and social dramas; more or less portrayal of women was in similar roles, male dominating revengeful hero was the main character and women was again a toy of joy in the hands of men.



Figure 6: Posters of films from 1970 to 1979 with representation of revenge, romance, music and cheap entertainment

1980 to 1989

This decade could also be defined as the decade of decline of Urdu cinema; on the other hand the Punjabi films were on the rise, as were the Pushto films. After the trendsetter like Maula Jatt in 1979, the violence was introduced in Pakistani film industry as never seen before. Anjuman and Musarrat Shaheen were introduced in 1980 and later both of them became the biggest heroines of the Punjabi and Pushto film industry respectively.

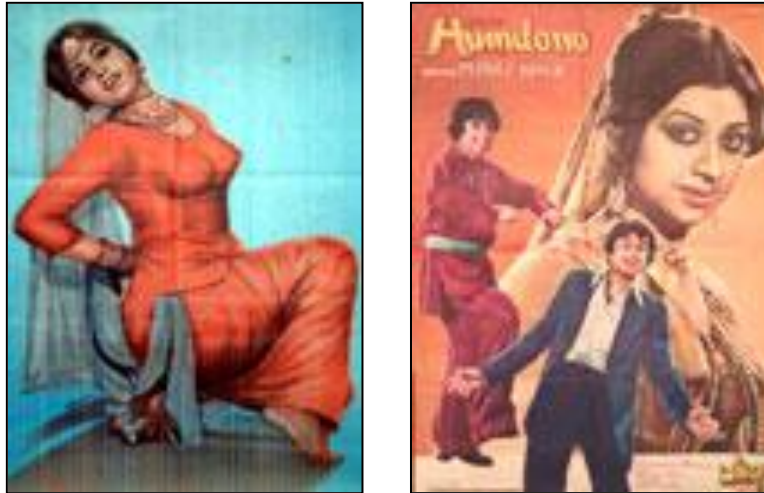


Figure 7: Posters of films from 1980 to 1989

From 1980 till 1989 235 Urdu films were released, in which only 23 were successful on box office. Whereas 24 Punjabi super hits made their way in total 353 Punjabi films were released. The Pushto film industry also became a large industry with 201 films released. Also to increase the circuit, a new kind of double version films were introduced, these were Punjabi films which were also dubbed in Urdu, so that to increase the business in the Karachi circuit to. In this era the film industry was working on the same trends; the bulky heroine was on the dance floor and the hero with concept of full violence. The portrayal of women in this era was an object of desire and sensuality for the audience.

1990 to 2004

The Pakistani film industry from the 1990's era, and to date, is still on board with inheriting most of the elements from the 1980's trend of their formula films. The only difference was in a few new actors, like Reema and Shan were introduced. Saima replaced Anjuman with Sultan Rahi's death in 1996. Punjabi films still dominate the industry with same storylines and themes of violence, revengeful hero and bulky heroine dances, which were once themes of Anjuman and Sultan Rahi's films, now replaced by Saima and Shan. The trends were being followed from the last decades, but yet these films didn't prove to show enough effort to revive the Pakistani cinema. Till now the films had set a pattern of their script with drama to fights to songs to glamorized dance, everything was present in these films. These films were proved to provide a negative depiction of women in cinema, the imagery created was merely showing them as objects of desire and entities who can't survive and stand for their rights without having a man's hand with them. Sadly this situation not only presumes in present cinema but also has got increased to a much higher extent.

Conclusion

At the end, this thesis analyzes that filmmakers generally have not tried to explore the new themes for the Cinema and even if they do realize these new concepts they do not do anything about. When the filmmakers were interviewed for this specific issue, most of them state that this is what the viewers want to see and they have no choice in the matter; they are running a business and profitability in a business is the prime motive of it. At the start Pakistani cinema was only meant for the entertainment of the viewer but never used as a tool for social and political awareness in people's minds. The trend in these early films as concerned with the characters and roles, gives an impression that the themes and scripts were mostly revolving around the female characters with their very glamorous and seductive styles. The trends and themes in the film industry of Pakistan generally can be described as romantic, emotional, expressional, glamorous, sensual and include sex objectivism. Finally the Pakistani Film industry till now is rather difficult to divide into developmental phases because, as we have analyzed, the Pakistani Film industry instead of evolving and making improvements in its overall structure has been gradually declining. The Cinema halls in the country overall have been converted in to Malls and Markets. It is believed that the cause of the conversion of Cinemas into mall is a trend within the Pakistani films; which are based on cheap entertainment of sex objectivism and macho maleness.

End Notes

¹ Novelty Theater could be considered as the first cinema of subcontinent where the entrance tickets ranged from four *annas*, i.e., twenty-five paisas, to two rupees, at that time.

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