CHAPTER VII:

Representation of 1857 in Films

The Uprising of 1857 has been represented variously in literature and films, from the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ to the ‘First War of Indian Independence’. A study of this subject would provide a perplexing view into the post-Independence Indian tendency to locate its roots in the Uprising of 1857 – a foundation with an altering and developing sense of historical significance, being re-visited and re-invented through all these decades from various perspectives. The present chapter shall focus only on the representation of 1857 in three major Indian films, namely – Shatranj Ke Khiladi (1977), Junoon (1979) and Mangal Pandey: The Rising (2005).

Time yields perspectives. India became an independent nation on 15th August 1947, but this joy was not achieved without the pangs of suffering – with the Partition, the riots and at the same time, the immense urgency to nurture the new-born in the cradle of democracy. Ten years later, 1957, brought in the opportunity – celebrating the centenary of the rebellion of 1857. Savarkar’s claim of the Uprising being inspired by ‘swadharma’ and ‘swaraj’ in establishing it as ‘a war of Independence’ provided the base, along with Karl Marx’s declaration of 1857 as a ‘national revolt’ in an article entitled ‘The Revolt in
the Indian Army' published in the New-York Daily Tribune dated 15th July 1857, where he writes:

It is the first time that the sepoy regiments have murdered their European officers; That Mussalmans and Hindus, renouncing their mutual antipathies, have combined against their common masters; that "disturbances beginning with the Hindus, have actually ended in placing on the throne of Delhi a Mohammedan Emperor"

This provided, perhaps, the best instance of communal amity leading to a nationalist outbreak – a foundation essential for a recently born Nation-State to re-establish its sense of ‘self’ after the various political ups and downs of the first decade of Independence.

The point of focus here, however, is not to trace the actual nature of the Uprising – whether it is a ‘mutiny’ or ‘a war of independence’. The entire reference to the centenary celebrations of the rebellion of 1857 is aimed at examining the reason behind the box-office failure of the very first film on 1857 – Sohrab Modi’s Jhansi Ki Rani, ‘India’s First Picture in Color by Technicolor’, released in 1953. The film failed probably because it was released before time could traditionalize and institutionalize the ethos of nationalism in the re-invention of the Uprising of 1857.
The next film to hit the screen on this subject was Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* (1977). This film, depicting in two parallel narratives the story of two chess-playing *Jagirdars* (based on Munshi Premchand's short story) and Dalhousie's take-over of Awadh, brought in a strain of nationalist sentiment in its depiction of the latter. While in the original story, Premchand focuses upon just the lifestyle of the *jagirdars* and their passion for the game of chess, Ray in his film problematizes the storyline by contextualizing the narrative within the society of Awadh during the 19th century parallely with the annexation of Awadh, including the details of the domesticity of the two *jagirdars*, and employing the game of chess as a wonderful metaphor of the transitional society of Awadh during this phase of transfer of power.

The film begins with a close-up of the chess board showing a game in progress, and gradually shifts to reveal the two players – Mirza Sajid Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, while the narrative voice says:


and further,

"Ab shayad aap poochhe ki bhai inhe koi aur kaam nahi hai kya? Ji nahi. Bhala Jagirdaron ko koi kaam hua karta hai!"
Shatrani Ke Khiladi – the game of chess in progress

The empty throne of Awadh
The animation of Lord Dalhousie
In depicting the passions, hobbies and activities of Mirza Sajid Ali and Meer Roshan Ali, as also their inability to decipher or control their domesticities, the film portrays the general trend of the jagirdars in the 19th century Lucknow, who had lost all connections with any productive or effective work and were used to a lethargic life of leisure. Their habit of surviving upon the glory of their ancestors is shown clearly when on being informed by Munshi Nandlal Singh about the possibility of the Company taking over Awadh, Mirza shows him the sword of his great grandfather and adds with conviction:

aakhir aise surmaaon ka kuchh khoon hamari ragon mein bhi to daur raha hoga!

Kyon, Mir sahab?

The masterstroke of Ray's vision as an observer and satirist is brought in when Munshi Nandlal demonstrates to them how the game of chess is played in a slightly different manner according to the English norms. At the end of the film when Lucknow is captured by the British, the futility of the jagirdars is portrayed as Ray shows them outdoors, far away from the tensions of the city and their respective houses, playing the game of chess, albeit in the English manner. This scene also acts as an implicit statement upon the transitoriness of power and the nature of shifting loyalties among this class of ineffective elites.

Towards the beginning of the film, as the camera moves on to capture the empty throne of Lucknow, shifting from the context of Mirza and Mir, the narrative voice observes:

"Is shaukin riyaia ke sartaaj hain Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, jinhe raaj-kaaj ke alawa
har tarah ka shauq hai.”

This serves as the first introduction of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to the audience who are then made familiar with the king through his various activities ranging from his theatre to his harem. The narrative voice adds:

Unhe huqumat kama pasand na sahi, apna taaj behad pasand tha. Paanch saal pehle ki baat hai, unhone isi taaj ko bade shauq ke sath London ki ek numaish mein bheja tha,

which is followed by an extract from Lord Dalhousie’s letter:

the wretch in Lucknow who has sent his crown to the Exhibition would have done his people and us a good service if he had sent his head in it – and he would never have missed it. That is a cherry which will drop into our mouths one day.

The camera then shows an animation of Lord Dalhousie picking up cherries named Punjab, Burma, Nagpur, Satara, Jhansi and devouring them one by one until only one cherry named Awadh is left, from which the age-old historical liaison of the Nawabs of Awadh with the British Empire, based on perpetual threats and demand for money, is revealed through animation. In this manner, by continuously stringing in various social and political realities of the 19th century Awadh, the audience is introduced to the strong satiric though eclectic approach which the film shall presume, as characteristic of the vision of Satyajit Ray – unbiased, all-inclusive and non-judgmental.

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The satire operates all through the film mainly through the blending of the game of chess with the contemporary political realities and the introduction of the omnipotent narrative voice which strings in the two parallel narratives from time to time thereby creating a wonderful tapestry of the 19th century Awadh society and elevating *Shatranj ke Khiladi* from simply a period film to the level of a socio-political document of Lucknow in the 19th century.

The next scene shows the General Outram discussing his opinions regarding the state of Awadh and Wajid Ali Shah with Weston. He asks Weston for the details of the activities of the king as a poet, composer and his passion for dance as well. He also enquires about Wajid Ali Shah's harem consisting of four hundred concubines and his twenty nine *muta* wives. Upon gathering enough details from Weston, General Outram questions:

And what kind of a king does all this make him, Weston?,

to which the latter replies,

Rather a special kind, sir, I should think.

Outram retorts sharply:

*Special?* I should use a much stronger word than that, Weston. A *bad* king. A frivolous, effeminate, irresponsible, worthless king.
In this manner, the difference in the perception of power and rule, and the clash between the English and Indian notions regarding the same are introduced within the film. While the English understanding of ‘rule’ would not compromise upon the qualities of a king, essentially masculine and thereby opposed to his encouragement, appreciation and participation in fine arts, the Indian view of it is seen to be much more inclusive and liberal. Wajid Ali Shah’s helplessness and situational irony is revealed later in the film and gains prominence when placed against Outram’s judgmental opinion.

Punning on the word ‘rule’, the film conveys the relative understanding of the term based on one’s own sense of culture and conscience. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, who takes interest in everything except ruling his state, receives a blow from General Outram, who comments:

He can’t rule, he does not wish to rule, and therefore, he has no business to rule.

However, given the historical fact of the limited powers of the Nawab, the alternative meaning of ‘rule’ as perceived by the colonized Other, in this case, ironically, the Nawab himself, brings in a element of pathos when he recollects after receiving the letter of take-over from the Company later in the film, how he had endeavoured to maintain an army of his own, how the then British Resident had asked him to dismiss it and how he was left with hardly anything to do as the king, bereft of his powers and responsibilities towards the state:
Yaad hai.. .kitne dilkash naam rakhe the humne apne paltano ke – Banka,
Tirchha, Akhtari, Nadiri, Ghungroo?...lekin Resident sahab ko ye sab gawaara
nahi tha...kehne lage is fauj ki kya zaroorat hai?...bahot behtar Richmond
sahab. Aapka hukm sar aankhon par...ab kya karen? Badshah agar apne
riyaian ke liye pareshan na ho, to kya kare? Ek badshah badshahat na kare, to
kya kare?

It is here, in Wajid Ali Shah’s pondering upon the situation he was left in, that refuge in
creative pursuits emerges as his understanding and defiance of the English verdict which
restricted him from access to his own people by putting a restraint upon his powers, as
also a counter-discourse to the concept of ‘rule’ as discussed by General Outram
previously. He continues:

Is sawal ka jawab bhi humein mil gaya. Richmond sahab ne nahi bataya. Kisi
ne nahi bataya. Khud ba khud mil gaya. Aapko humara wo geet yaad hai...
“tadap-tadap sagri rain gujri/ kaun des gayo sawariya!”...aap jante hain humne
ye geet kab aur kahaan racha tha?...Yahin. Isi takht par. Aur wo bhi bhare
durbar mein. Sara manzar ek tasveer ki tarah humein yaad hai. Ek aadmi
humare samne haat jode khada hai. Uski faryaad suni ja rahi hai. Ki achanak ek
Perhaps art as an answer to the identity crisis of a man of power could not have been reflected in any other manner, and that Wajid Ali Shah introspects and achieves an understanding of his passion towards fine arts as a ruler and takes pride in the same, instead of regretting his ‘negligence’ towards the throne and the people as the Company had accused him of, is further visible as he tells his ministers:

Zara resident sahib se jaakar maalum to kijiye, Inglistaan ke kaun-kaun se badshah geet likha karte the, aur malika Victoria ki riyaaiia unke kitne geet gaati hain?,

and further,


The tone of challenge and confidence as a ruler is clearly discernible in his voice. Ray’s focus was probably on including within his camera all the dimensions and concepts of rule and power. When one places his view worked out in *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* against the Indian political context of 1977, i.e. the era of a national emergency, the film assumes an added dimension and strings in 1857 as depicted in Awadh, as a situation quite close to
the contemporary understanding of power in the post-1947 democracy, accommodating
and assimilating a multi-dimensional understanding of these notions and concepts.

The heroism of Wajid Ali Shah lies in welcoming the usurpers on the notes of *shehnai*
than on that of cannons, as he instructs his ministers:

...lekin unke [English] aane se pehle tamaam morchebandiyani khatam kar di
jaae, topein utaar li jaae, aur pehredaaron se unke hathiyar le liye jaae, aur
aelaan karwa diya jaae ki jab Angrez fauj Lucknow mein kadam rakhegi to
humari riyaaiaa unke muqable ki koi koshish nahi karegi,

and his resistance lies in retaining his integrity as a creative artist, who despite all his
misfortunes, strings his love for his land into a memorable couplet:

Jab chhod chale Lucknow nagari

Kaho haal adam par kya guzri.

Shyam Benegal’s *Junoon* (1979), on the other hand, based on *A Flight of Pigeons* by
Ruskin Bond, portrays the subjective sufferings on both sides – Indian, as well as,
English, against the backdrop of 1857. The most interesting transformation in the film is
brought about by the shift in the narrative voice. While in the novel, Bond writes “I will
let Ruth take up the story” (Bond 05), in the film the story is seen through the eyes of the
camera – omnipotent and omnipresent, instead of personal recollections of Ruth Labadoor.

The film begins with the portrayal of a religious gathering and a fakir in a state of trance, whom the other people, including Javed Khan, watch bewildered as he predicts a great deal of bloodshed and refers to the contemporary local myth of hundred years of English rule:

...unki kismat mein sau saal the. Khatm hue wo. Kabootaron ki tarah ud jaenge wo. Kabootaron ki tarah ud jaenge wo,

thereby ushering in a comparison between the British and the pigeons, and also introducing the ‘pigeon’ motif into the film which shall henceforth form the strongest link of integrity between Javed and Ruth. It would be worthwhile to observe here that the original text by Bond has no reference to this myth of hundred years of British rule, used so repeatedly in the films made upon this subject. This suggests the mechanism of shifting and grounding contexts upon the masses and the local beliefs when a text is made into a period film, in order to establish authenticity, credibility and neutrality of the representation.

Naseeruddin Shah, who plays Sarfaraaz in the film, voices the actual historical background as a sepoy directly involved in the uprising. Javed reaches home to find
The Academy Poster of Junoon Sarfaraaz and Firdaus in Junoon

Ruth Labadoor in Benegal’s Junoon
Sarfaraaz describing the heroic valour of the rebellion to Firdaus and telling her how Bahadur Shah Zafar has been proclaimed the king by the rebel sepoys. To this Javed retorts:

...naam bhar ka shehenshah hai wo. Asli hukumat to baagi sipahiyon ke haathon mein hai, wo bhi chand dino ke liye. Baagi sipahiyon ko waapas apne isharon pe nachana angrezon ke bnaaye haath ka khel hai... aur phir in nawabon ke muqable mein angrez kya bure hain? Aur ye nawab jo tumhara saath de rahe hain na? Mehes ek dikhawa hai, dikhawa. Angrezon ne inka aish-o- aaraam chhen liya hai, jhallaye hue hain tabse.

He then proceeds to feed his pigeons, to which Sarfaraaz reacts:

Sara mulq aag mein jhulas raha hai aur aap kabootar uda rahein hain.

Through Javed and Sarfaraaz, Benegal brings in the actual complexity of the Uprising - diverse and multifaceted, where even the closest of friends had difference of opinion upon the same subject. While Sarfaraaz represents that small section of sepoys who were directly affected by the atrocities of the British and sought freedom from this tyranny, Javed's voice is that of the distant onlooker, who has no qualms of nationalism and can easily state the hard facts about the hypocritical nawabs and present the real picture of divided feudal interests straight on the face of Sarfaraaz. It would be worthwhile to note here that Javed himself.joined in the Uprising at a much later stage when Delhi had already
been lost to the English, and that too due to reasons strongly personal because Mariam – Ruth’s mother, had set the victory of Delhi as her condition for the marriage of Ruth and Javed Khan.

Resistance, in this film, is seen to be operative on both the sides – in Mariam’s refusal of Javed Khan’s proposal to marry her daughter Ruth even under such adverse circumstances, as well as Javed Khan’s refusal to join the rebellion entirely despite repeated rebukes from Sarfaraaz. The issue is further problematized by using the ‘pigeon’ motif repeatedly. It is in their affection towards these pigeons that Javed and Ruth come to share a relationship, though non-verbal. As opposed to the violent context of the Uprising, the pigeons symbolize peace and nurture silently the inter-personal relationships of individuals caught in a context of bloodshed and aggression.

The women in the film bring in an additional dimension to the context of the Uprising as represented in Junoon. Firdaus, Javed’s wife, who is completely hostile towards Javed’s decision of keeping the firangans at his residence is seen to soften when Mariam tells her:

Begum, humse naraaz na ho. Apni mari se nahi aaye hain hum…meri ammi Rampur ki nawab khaandaan se hain… meri ammi ki shadi ek angrez ke saath hui thi.
This understanding of the helplessness of the Other woman, despite the differences in nationality, race and cultures, incorporates within this otherwise period film, a reference to the religion of human tolerance and understanding, beyond the cartographic borders and political treatise. It is further consolidated by the character of Kothiwali, who on her first introduction to Mariam and her family at Javed’s house, says:

Jab jung hoti hai to aurat zaat par hi qayamat toot’ti hai.

Significantly, it is after she says this that Mariam is seen to break into tears for the first and probably the only time in the film. This understanding and sense of solidarity, based on shared experiences, through sharing the same biological sex, though in two completely different situations, and thereby this ability to comprehend each other’s situation, further problematizes the concepts of race and nationality. It is later seen in the film that despite these terrible circumstances, Mariam and Ruth spend the most memorable and joyous times at the Kothiwali’s house – knitting, singing, swinging, chatting. When Javed comes to inquire about his proposal of marrying Ruth from Mariam, it is the Kothiwali’s daughter-in-law who comforts the anxious Ruth, while when the Kothiwali loses her son in the battle against the English during the rebellion it is Ruth and Mariam who console the Kothiwali and her daughter-in-law.

The direct clash between the Indians and the English is portrayed in the film verbally through the interactions between Mariam and Sarfaraaz, when the latter refers to the
historical slaughter carried out by Colonel Neill on being reminded of humanity by Mariam:

Insaniyat ka sawaal tabhi uthta hai jab koi angrez marta hai, kyonki uski ek shaksiyat hoti hai, naam-pataa darj rehta hai unka. Aur hindusthaniyon ki taadaat to waise bhi zaroorat se bahot zyada hai, hai na? Tabhi to tumhare karnal Neill hindusthaniyon ko gaajar-mooli ki tarah kaat’te hain.

In this manner, not only is history blended with fiction, but also through the detailing of suffering and loss on both sides, and the helplessness of finite individuals caught within their limited, though honest perceptions, the larger canvas of a multidimensional truth is held up for the audience, where one must learn to accept the suffering of both Sarfaraaz and Mariam as two sides of the same truth. And it is only through this acceptance that one may be able to understand the conclusion of the film where having lost Delhi when Javed returns to the abandoned village and goes to seek Ruth in the church, Mariam turns him away but Ruth opens the door of the church and runs to him calling him by his name for the first time, as Javed looks at her and gallops away with the tune of ‘chal Khusro ghar aapne’ playing in the background.

Both these films released in the 1970s, bring in the nationalist strain parallelly with the subjective impact. While the two Jagirdars start a new game of chess in the English manner at the end of Shatranj Ke Khiladi, Javed dies in the battle and Ruth dies fifty five
years later in England, unwed, in Junoon. The focus is on the acceptance of as also the adaptation to new norms, and the essence of inter-personal relationships across the barriers of race and nationality, respectively.

After a huge gap of almost three decades, Ketan Mehta’s Mangal Pandey: The Rising (2005), however, sets in a sharp contrast. It would be interesting to observe here that Junoon, in a way, anticipates the potential of individual heroism latent in the character of Mangal Pandey in Sarfaraaz’s reference to him, who, nevertheless, also points out the historic specification of Mangal Pandey’s predicament when he says:

Rag-rag mein compani bahadur ke wafadari basi thi uske, isiliye aaen waqt par ungli jakar gayi..goli nahi chalaa paayaa bechara. Phir bhi usey phansi di gayi.Poori ki poori tukri barkhaast kar di gayi.

But, three decades is time enough to overcome limitations, and thus released in the context of the 21st century diaspora, Mangal Pandey: The Rising, finds the stage set to portray a character larger-than-life, rooting in him the historic potential of the tradition of individual heroism in India and shaping the historical events to form a spectacle of the ‘first war of Indian independence’.

With its world premiere at the Locarno Film Festival, Switzerland, Mangal Pandey, the film, has been thus rated by BBC in a film review:
one of the most ambitious cross over projects to emerge out of India in recent times, The Rising succeeds in entertaining and educating audiences about an important turning point in Indian history.

Released on 12th August 2005, the film begins with the following declaration:

Where history meets proud folklore, there legends are born.

This statement holds within itself the grounds of the blending of fact and fiction, thereby giving rise to a new hero, and forms the base of the representation, re-interpretation and re-analysis of history, which the film shall attempt. The screen then breaks into a song punning upon the word ‘Mangal’, which represents something auspicious and also declares the name of the martyr to be celebrated through the narrative. The locals are seen to sing seated on an elephant moving through the streets and bazaars:

Mangal, Mangal, Mangal, Mangal, Mangal, Mangal ho!

Jaage nagar saare, jaage hain ghar saare, jaaga hai ab har gaan

Jaagi hai bagiya to jaage hain ped aur jaagi hai pedo ki chhaon.

Though at the opening, this song shows the entire village coming to life from a still painting and contextualizes the narrative in 1857, yet as the film develops upon the story till the final arrest and hanging of Mangal Pandey, one can see that this song is also a kind of invocation of the heroic spirit of Mangal Pandey which elevates him to the stature of an epic hero initiating the struggle for Indian Independence and the national
consciousness, by stringing in his heroism with the Uprising in the other parts of India right down to the 20th century nationalist struggle headed by Mahatma Gandhi and the final attainment of freedom. In this manner, ‘Mangal’ as used in the song stands to signify not just the protagonist, but the auspicious forecast of the Indian Independence as well — the creation of a new history of a democracy more than five decades old, celebrated and sung by the ‘loka’ or the masses. The stress on the word ‘jaago’ stands out as an explanation of the rebellion as the rising, in being knit together with the call for awakening of the masses.

The film begins with Mangal Pandey being brought to the noose, where it is learnt that the hangman has refused to perform his duty and run away, and so a hangman is summoned from Calcutta to accomplish the task. By alluding to this incident glory is added to the halo of martyrdom surrounding Mangal Pandey and the film then proceeds to narrate his story in flashback. From the battlefields of the Anglo-Afghan war, and the establishment of a special bond between Mangal Pandey and the English officer William Gordon whom Mangal saves from the enemy, the camera moves on to catch a glimpse of the New Year’s eve being celebrated at the mansion of Governor General Lord Canning where he says in his speech:

We have earned the love and gratitude of the people of India and we shoulder the burden of the white man without complaint.
Mangal Pandey and William Gordon

Mangal Pandey – the martyr
This reference to the white man’s burden authenticates the periodization of the film even further. At this event, Mangal Pandey is shown to be one of the soldiers guarding the gates of the Residency who steps forward from his line of duty to save a fellow native being caned by an English officer, Hewson, for having dropped a drink on a lady’s dress. Hence, from the very first scene Mangal is portrayed to be a man with a strong sense of solidarity and commitment towards his fellow human beings.

In the next scene Gordon is shown to be out in the village looking for Mangal who has apparently not gone to duty that day. He discovers Mangal in the wrestling ground and they have a wrestling match. This scene is extremely important because here wrestling is used as a playful metaphor to depict the difference of opinions between Gordon and Mangal, despite their friendship. It is during the wrestling match that they talk and sort out their differences upon the aforementioned subject, i.e. why Gordon did not stop Hewson from beating the native at the Governor General’s house. It is here that Gordon explains to Mangal in course of the wrestling match the limitations of his rank and apologies for the same. Throughout the entire length of the film it is this equation of understanding and misunderstanding that remains active between Mangal and Gordon, and a bridge of inter-personal relationship is created and maintained despite the social scenario.
The relationship between Mangal Pandey and William Gordon remains perhaps the most interesting part of the film, because it is through Gordon that Mangal is shown to attain his knowledge and understanding of the operation of the Company. In one of the scenes, Mangal asks Gordon about the Company and Gordon replies:

Tumhare Ramayan mein ek villain hai. Raavan. Dus seer wala. Bas waise hi company ke hazaron seer hote hain jo laalach ki gond se jude hote hain.

This comparison between the East India Company and Raavan bridges the cultural gap between the alien governance and the native understanding. That Gordon can draw a parallel between the two, shows his understanding of the Indian culture and his condemnation of his own employers, thereby problematizing the notions of race and nationality vis-à-vis the religion of unbiased humanity. It is through him that the introduction of the new rifle and cartridges is opposed time and again the film; it is he who tries to defend Mangal Pandey even during the court martial and it is to him that Mangal Pandey reveals in the end:

Aaj mujhe ehsaas hua ki maine jo kuchh bhi kiya aur jo kuchh main karne jaa raha hoon uska kartoons ko muh lagaane se ya achhot ho jaane se koi sambandh nahi hai...ab humari ladaai kartoons pe lagi charbi ke khilaaf nahi hai. Humari ladaai hai humare samman ke liye. Azadi ke liye. Apna sar uthakar jeene ke adhikar ke liye. Kartoons...charbi...wo sab jhooth, bemaani
hai. Main wahi kartoos ko hazaar bar kaat ke daagne taiyar hoon agar mujhe meri azaadi mil jaaye,

and further,


In this manner through slippery logic, Mangal Pandey in this film is transformed into a spokesperson of the Indian national consciousness. History is moulded to suit the taste and necessities of the 21st century trans-national audience. Facts are merged to elevate the martyr to the level of a seer who prophesies the democratic form of governance in modern India when he criticizes the narrow selfish interests and cowardice of the nawabs and rajas of India in front of Azimullah and Tantia Tope and on being asked by him who will rule the country after the rebellion, he predicts:

Log. England mein bhi rani ke naam ka sirf sikka chalta hai, lekin sarkar logon ki hai.

Ketan Mehta’s Mangal Pandey is a man who has some initiation into the English language by virtue of his relationship with Gordon. He has a profound insight into the state of affairs, the ability to introspect, organize and inspire, a thirst for knowledge and an ability to transcend blind beliefs like caste and superstition in the interest of
nationalism — all that is essential in the making of a hero, rendering him acceptable to the audience of the 21st century, and enabling the citizens of India to take pride in the existence of such a sensitive and rational mind from wherein sprang the seeds of the rising or the clarion call for the awakening of the masses. Aamir Khan as Mangal Pandey — well-built, with a characteristic moustache and dauntless courage, earns nods and applauds globally as he announces at the noose:

Meri aakhri ichchha aap poori nahi kar sakte lekin wo poori hogi zaroor,

followed by the famous cry:

Halla Bol!

Resistance is here translated into power by immortalizing the cry and spirit of Mangal Pandey, and merging it at the end with a clipping of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi leading a mass-movement against the British. For an ordinary viewer, Mangal Pandey emerges as an epitome of heroism, for whether or not he met Tantia Tope and planned an Uprising to be scheduled on 31st May 1857, which got accidentally disrupted and led to his being hanged on 8th April 1857, whether or not the sepoys, including Mangal Pandey, actually went to the factory and eye-witnessed the rumour about the cartridges to be true, and other such historic details get obliterated behind the glamour of the silver screen.

The film also explores the various other perspectives the realities of the 19th century Indian society, as in the depiction of the wet nurse Kamla taking care of the white child
while at the same time drugging her own child with opium, the prostitute Heerabai having access to the secrets of the drunk English officers of the Company whom she accompanies each night, and in the interest of the film, which she passes on to Mangal Pandey, the young woman Jwala who is saved from sati by William Gordon and the other village folk discussing the use and abuse of telegraph being introduced by the East India Company. All this, irrespective of reality and truth, contributes in creating an ambience of the period and assists in the development of plot as conceived by the director.

Interestingly, William Gordon, as portrayed in the film, is a Scottish officer in the East India Company who is alienated by the other whites due to his imperfect lineage and also his sympathy towards the natives, and therefore, stands to represent a different class of Englishmen. He embodies that spirit of resistance, in his own right, which transcends the sweeping generalizations often drawn regarding the identity of a human individual along the course of imperialist/nationalist conclusions. This division of hierarchy between the Englishmen themselves becomes the source of a cultural bridging and introspection in the hands of the director, for it is Gordeon who appears at the court martial of Mangal Pandey to speak in his favour, fails to defend him, and shouts at his seniors asking:

...has the Company become so blinded by arrogance and greed that it cannot see the danger which stares it in the face?
As time progresses, the perception of the ‘self’ and the sense of ‘identity’ changes – and probably, therein lies the need to invent a tradition as well as traditionalize the invention. Amartya Sen observes in *Identity and Violence*:

...the unquestioning acceptance of a social identity may not always have traditionalist implications. It can also involve a radical reorientation in identity which could then be sold as a piece of alleged “discovery” without reasoned choice.

A study of the representation of 1857 in films leads one to a very interesting juncture of history-fiction cross-section, helping to understand the interaction and interchange between the two, probably as a condition essential to the development and perpetuation of the Nation-State, and also reveals the varying natures of reading the same event as the signifier as the equation of power begins to operate at multiple levels, and the nation stands up to incorporate multiple understandings and manifestations of resistance, in an age of diasporic existence.

From the failure of Modi’s *Jhansi ki Rani*, through the realms of the personal and the political as depicted in *Shatranj Ke Khilari* and *Junoon*, to the final *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, one can see the need of the nation to revert to the same historical incident in order to trace a tradition of continuity and come to terms with the identity-specific questions of the altering society and world. G.N. Devy observes in *After Amnesia*:

This fantasization of the past, the loss of capacity to see that the distant past has
reached modern times after passing through a complex process of mutation at
the hands of the immediate past...are all consequences of the cultural amnesia
into which Indian culture has regressed during the colonial period (Devy 59).

Whether one agrees with the point of 'regression' or not, this observation perhaps holds
ture for the representation of Uprising in films, where history is re-framed and re-
constructed through altered narrative interventions to suit the expectations of a global
audience, through changing times and perceptions.

* Film transcripts used are mine.