

# Contemporary Children's Cinema and Bollywood: A Critical Reading of Select Films by Vishal Bharadwaj

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## Abstract:

Vishal Bharadwaj, internationally acclaimed for masterful adaptations of Shakespeare's plays is often not given the credit due for his contributions towards the marginalised genre of children's cinema in India. Bharadwaj's directorial debut, the horror-comedy *Makedee*, 2002 and the 2005, comedy-drama *The Blue Umbrella*, are noteworthy as they memorably contest the deeply ingrained Indian prejudice against the girl child. Both the narratives subvert girls' position of 'relative invisibility', captures the zeitgeist of the child by mapping the journey of young female protagonists as "agents of change", their evolution into knowledge producers and of becoming change makers. This paper will highlight the directors attempt to capture the mood of the people in post-liberalized new India and the making of children's cinema in a period that is considered to be a crucial turn for the film industry i.e., corporatization and its effect on the medium. The paper elaborates how the quest motive plays an important role in captivating young audience's attention while the narrative tactfully makes the older audience ponder about the nature of education they want to impart to children in the era that is ridden by evils like superstition, greed and corruption, through the employment of interesting tropes and techniques. The portrayal of the proletariat, non- English speaking girl child's masterful dealings with the struggles and challenges of an increasingly corrupt, hateful world that is losing direction under the capitalistic logic of accumulation, consumerism, commodity fetishism, this paper will argue, is the director's means to bring together the Asian values of "sympathy, distributive justice, duty consciousness, public spiritedness and group orientation" with western knowledge like "rationality, liberty and rights consciousness due to process of law, privacy and individualism" (Tu 264) in the cinematic medium. The female protagonists acquire wisdom through their interactions with human as well as with the non human world and by actively converting the

information acquired from school and surroundings into knowledge. The ‘self’ of the young female subject in the select narratives, the paper argues, is located in, ‘composite relations within a community’ and therefore personal fulfillment is an impossible desire in a such a state.

**Keywords:** Children’s Cinema, Film Industry, Hindi Cinema, Female Subject, Asian Value

**Paper:**

Storytelling is one of the oldest and most powerful of arts practiced by human since time immemorial. The purpose of this form broadly speaking, has been dual: entertainment and education. With the passage of time the art of storytelling has not just managed to survive but thrived because of its ability to seamlessly integrate with new modes and mediums. We all grew up listening to stories from our grandmothers and mothers or reading story books but since we discovered the magic of moving images we witnessed a remarkable shift in this process. The introduction of the visual and the audio-visual medium in the Indian sub-continent with the films *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) & *Alam Ara* (1931) respectively, revolutionized storytelling in unimaginable and novel ways. Television and internet boom in the succeeding decades further democratized access to the medium. In the early half of the twentieth century Children’s magazines performed this purpose while in the second half the audio-visual medium is essaying this role. The potential of the cinematic medium was precociously gauged by the Indian government which in turn lead to the founding of Children’s Film Society India (CFSI), in 1955, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting whose aim was to create content exclusively for children. However, unfortunately, the influence of CSFI has been limited as it has managed to churn out a handful of films since its inception. Vishal Bharadwaj<sup>i</sup> in an interview with INUTH shared that,

...we have a Children’s Film Society of India (CFSI), none of whose films get a theatrical release. They’re given minuscule budgets, and there’s this notion that because it is a children’s film...we will need to order less cloth for their costumes, which in turn means that’s the film will cost less to make. They’re such terrible films, no money is spent on making them more visible. We are still dubbing the same films over and over again<sup>ii</sup>

One may argue that Bharadwaj has all good reasons for sounding hopeless regarding CSFI’s approach as his first directorial venture, *Makdee*, made under its aegis was rejected because of creative differences. He reveals

in an interview that he bought the film and took on the role of a producer as there was no other way for him to be sure about his craft <sup>iii</sup> *Makdee*, despite limited box office success went on to be touted as a cult film in the genre of Children's Cinema. What needs to be acknowledged in this context is the poor funding that Children's entertainment has been subjected to in the pre liberalization era<sup>iv</sup>. Therefore, Bharadwaj's act was not exceptional keeping in mind the temporal framework. This historical juncture i.e., after liberalization of the India economy for Bollywood is important because Bombay cinema was slowly breaking away from the old risky model of "film financiers" and as Aswin Punathambekar in the Introduction of, *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry* points out, I quote "in May 1998, the Indian government transformed world media by granting Bombay cinema industry status" (1) and this reinvigorated the craft. The shift from borrowing money at high rates of interest to the studio model wherein the making cost was recovered at distribution level, the craft and technique of filmmaking witnessed a revolution of sorts in late twentieth and early twenty first century India. *Makdee* was distributed by Precept Picture Company, a Bollywood company's second venture and the multiplex model, (introduced in 1997 in India) the latest intervention in the arena of showcasing films provided a novel platform for films like *Makdee* that cater to a specific type of audience and are of shorter duration. Multiplexes were eager to showcase films of shorter duration because more number of shows could be accommodated in a day. This in turn provided a welcome boost to films that were shorter in duration like Children's films. Filmmaking therefore became more sustainable and new avenues opened up for filmmakers like Bharadwaj who wanted to try out new genres and styles. Vishal Bharadwaj, a name that is usually associated with masterful retellings of Shakespeare's plays on the cinematic platform during this transitional phase of film industry's i.e., the late ninety's and early twenty first century contributed immensely to the marginalized genre of children's cinema with his memorable works like *Makdee* (2002), and *The Blue Umbrella* (2005). The quality of the latter film, produced by Walt Disney Pictures Pixar Animation Studios stands testimony to the arguments regarding the improvement in quality after corporatization of Bollywood.

Our children's affinity to the audio-visual medium in the contemporary milieu is uncontestable and this in turn compels to us engage with, and critically introspect upon the content they consume on everyday basis and also unearth resources that may play a crucial role in educating and entertaining them at the same time,

keeping in mind the need of hour the paper will analyze the films in discussion. Even though *Makdee* (2002) and *The Blue Umbrella* (2005) are almost two decades old their impact on our present cannot be denied because of their frequent broadcasts on channels dedicated to Hindi movies based entertainment as well as because of their availability on popular OTT, web based platforms and YouTube. *Makdee*, Bharadwaj's maiden directorial venture is a heart-touching tale of a pair of identical twin sisters (both roles essayed by Shweta Prasad), set in a rural, Hindi speaking region of India: Munni is a cute, obedient and innocent gal with a speech impediment (stammer) while Chunni is the uncontrollable, sharp, rebellious, naughty bully. The movie revolves around a short, yet, eventful period of the girls' childhood and opens with a chase sequence capturing the act of stealing and the ensuing hot pursuit of the thief, and introduces the reader to the mysterious, abandoned mansion that is the source of fear and trouble for the villagers. According to them the mansion is out of bounds as the five-hundred-year-old, as Makdee (played by Shabana Azmi) reigns it. The chase is given up as the thief is considered as good as dead after his entry into the mansion. The narrative shift back to the village but very soon returns to the haunted mansion. Kallu Kasai (the village butcher) chases Munni into the mansion mistaking her to be the troublemaker Chunni. Chunni on learning the truth from her friend Mughal-e- Azam is scared out of her wits! She tries getting help from the elders but her image of a trickster acts as an impediment. Chunni musters courage enters the witch's territory and strikes a deal. The witch hands over a hen to Chunni, claims that she can transform her sister back into the human self if Chunni procures hundred hens to satiate her hunger. Chunni under compulsion becomes a thief. Masterji, her school teacher on learning about her ordeal reassures her and enters the mansion and a puppy walks out. Everyone presumes it to be Masterji, however, Mughal-e- Azam recognizes his long lost pet pup, Aladdin. This discovery leads to the moment of epiphany and the spell of deception and lies are broken, for once and forever. As the tale unfolds the audience realizes that the clouds of the supernatural, horror and mystrey conjured by the crafty woman and her cohorts was to keep people at bay while they secretly unearth invaluable treasures hidden under the mansion. Unwanted visitors of the abandoned mansion are abducted to keep the truth hidden as well as to use the abductees as free labour for unearthing the invaluable treasures. Chunni also discovers in the process that the Makdee is a seasoned murderer and she has managed to put up a perfect façade for so long in the village because the police were hand in glove in all her unlawful actions. The film ends with the con-woman literally falling into her own trap,

beaten by the children whom she has been using as slave labour and with the handing over of the villainous lady along with her accomplices to the police. The stated resolution is arrived at in the film because of logical thinking, meticulous planning and fearless attitude of the children. Chunni's quick thinking, her bond with Mughal-e Azam, Alaadin, and love for her sister Munni helps her to discover her best and solve a mystery that has been the source of trouble and fear for the villagers and group work helps her to overcome the ordeals that come her way. Chunni with her unique attitude, re-directed energy and Masterji's timely intervention is able to overcome the barriers created by fear and superstition that created the aura of fear, restricting the imagination and action of the elders of her village.

The movie *The Blue Umbrella*, on the other hand is an adaptation of Ruskin Bond's story with the same title. Set in a breath-taking locale, a hillside town, the plot revolves around Biniya (played by Shreya Sharma), a young, carefree, bubbly girl from a village in the mountains located at the foothills of the Himalayas. The story opens with the soothing background of pristine blue skies and the young protagonist skilfully meandering through the green nooks and alleys crafted by nature. Biniya in the course of her strolls one day comes across a blue umbrella and when the rightful owner, a woman from a tourist group of East Asians, comes by, she hands it over. They communicate in gestures as they do not speak each others language but Biniya fathoms that the lady wants to buy her bear claw locket. Biniya refuses the money offered for her "lucky charm" i.e., the locket, but later on exchanges it for the striking blue umbrella. Nandkishore Khatri or Nandu Chacha's (played by Pankaj Kapoor) greedy eyes are set on it from day one. And very quickly this liking develops into an obsession. Khatri is the antagonist, the greedy, middle aged, cunning shopkeeper, the trickster figure in the story to whom children are drawn to because of his shop's goodies but are also equally wary of, as they are well acquainted with his attitude<sup>v</sup>. The idea of stealing the blue umbrella and dyeing it in a different colour to escape suspicion is suggested by Khatri's help, Rajaram and the former encourages an immediate implementation of the devious plan. Biniya is heartbroken when her umbrella goes missing. She suspects Khatri's foul play but is unable to hold him accountable as she does not have any proof. Khatri's shop is searched but to Biniya's dismay the umbrella is not found. Khatri on the other hand decides to make the most of the situation. He pretends to be hurt by the theft accusations and pledges to avenge the insult by buying a similar umbrella. Soon after he makes an entry into the village with his "new" red umbrella that he claims to

have purchased from Delhi. The attention of the village now shifts towards Khatri's red umbrella and he garners social respect because of his new possession. As a gesture of goodwill and an attempt to restore Khatri's lost honour the people of the village nominate Khatri as the guest of honour at the local wrestling competition. Perturbed Biniya on the other hand who never put a stop to her investigations discovers that Khatri's umbrella was not sent from Delhi but was sent by a textile dyer from a nearby town. To verify her suppositions, she takes a policeman with her to cross-question the dyer. By the time Biniya returns, rain starts pouring down. Khatri's truth is laid bare: as the red dye washes off the blue umbrella. As punishment Khatri is ostracized by the village and post-boycott he is lonely, miserable and steadily his economic condition deteriorates. People stop buying goods from his shop and his handyman Rajaram abandons him too. From the greedy, scheming figure his character is transformed into sorry, pity evoking figure. Biniya is unable to bear the transition in Khatri's situation. She perhaps feels that an object can never be more precious than a human being and wilfully gifts her umbrella to Khatri. Khatri is touched by the child's generous gesture and he in turn presents Biniya with a bear-claw locket. Biniya's reconciliation with Khatri and her act of forgiveness prompt the villagers to accept Khatri back into the social, cultural and economic life of the village.

Even though the tone, sub-genres, the craft and technique employed in the movies in discussion are very different but it is interesting to note that the both are driven by the unethical act of stealing, an event that causes disruption in the normal and everyday interactions within the village community that is otherwise free from conflict. The narratives with proto citizens as protagonists share a circular narrative pattern imitating the cycle of life that is integral to Indian mindscape and exchange of goods play a crucial role in setting the plots in motion. Biniya's tryst with the "blue umbrella" or "desire" for an object that cannot be shared by the community reminds us of Bataille's argument that how "the problem of economics is not how societies deal with scarcity, but how they deal with the inevitable surplus". It is only by giving away this "accursed share" and by laying claim on "love" that peace and harmony can be restored in society. The balance of the order that is disturbed by Biniya; exchanging the totem (that symbolizes tradition, love and connects Biniya to her community) for the Umbrella has to be restored by her giving away the new possession to foster friendship with Khatri. Makdee on the other hand is the villain because she refuses to re-distribute the wealth that she comes across by chance and refuses to share it with not only the village community but also with her accomplices. Chunni, therefore, becomes the



restorer of the order by outwitting the wicked intentions of the usurper with the help of the marginalized sections of the society. Kallu Kasai, the butcher who is typecast as cruel person because of his traditionally ordained profession and his “dimwitted” son emerge as Chunni’s unexpected helpmeets. By using an unusual suspect *Makdee*, the film repackages and deconstructs the repetitive motif of the “blood thirsty” witch or the terror inducing female ghost and helps the audience to rationalize the improbability of such occurrences, trappings of blind faith, superstition, irrational fear and how they are taken advantage of by anti social elements.

To elaborate further, while the ominous music with the title credits sets the suspenseful tone of *Makdee*, the camera’s deceptive presentation of reality in the opening shot that quickly switches from the thief’s perspective to the villagers and goes on to present a bird’s eye view of the ensuing chase of the thief for a critical spectator establishes the camera’s presentation of reality as; unreliable right from the start. The narrative begins with the interruption of the everyday life’s monotony with the act of “stealing” a hen, and goes on to expose how the village’s treasures are silently siphoned off by the gang of scammers because of the community’s superstitious attitudes. Chunni too has to commit the act of stealing for her to realize the truth of the wicked witch and break free from irrational attitudes. More importantly after the resolution of the mansion problem and garnering praise for her courage, Chunni reverts to her old, naughty self and the film ends with Kallu Kasai chasing Chunni as she sets free the hens from his shops cage. The movie ends with the same sequence that it commenced with that is of chase. *The Blue Umbrella*, on the other hand focusses on the very act of stealing, its repercussions on a community member and its resolution.

Both the narratives in discussion are set in the lap of nature<sup>vi</sup>, have young female protagonists at the center and engage with the question of children’s education in the age capital in nuanced ways. Chunni right from the start is a daredevil, despite being a trouble maker she takes to her heart the teachings of Masterji, the school teacher and resists the overwhelming belief of the villagers in the supernatural powers of the witch. After her sister’s disappearance her rational faculties are momentarily overpowered by the Makdees spectacular performance of “supernatural abilities” but with the reappearance of Alaadin (the non human subject) her logical faculties prevail and she is able to break the elaborately crafted mirage or *maya* of the witch. The love she has for her sister Munni is the source of her new found power and in Biniya’s case too love plays an important role in ending the conflict that develops between Nandkishore and the villagers. However, Biniya’s teacher is the

nature itself. While Nandkishore's plan is foolproof nature lays bare his truth. The cold, lonely, snowy winters expose Nandkishore's vulnerability and the threat of his possible extinction as he refuses to go to live in another village despite being subjected ostracization and repeated humiliation. Biniya's epiphany: that she got her umbrella "by chance" leads to her gifting her prized possession to the "fallen man" and restoring his position in society. Biniya's love stemming from empathy and kindness for a fellow human being leads to her reconciliation with Nandu *chacha*. The narrative comes to a full circle as it ends with Nandu Chacha relaxing on his charpoy listening to a Walkman with tourists enjoying light banter. The movie that begins with Khatri's Hotel and the prophetic voice on Walkman declaring, I quote,

You are a kind hearted human being. Your sacrifice, your desire for the happiness of other people. You remain in pain to bring smile on a stranger's lips. Very soon your miseries will reach an end. You are just about to find a treasure in dollar, in pound or in rupees. You are going to be multi-millionaire just like Bill Gates.

ends with the wealthy Khatri, the proud owner of the *chatri* as well as the heart of his friends and neighbours. Hinting yet again the supremacy of love over wealth and acquisitions. The camera pans to the board displaying the shop name that stands corrected as Chatri Hotel as the movie comes to an end.

The portrayal of the figure of the "child" as the "new hope" by Ritwick Ghatak in *Subarnarekha* and Shyam Benegal in *Ankur* reemerges in the neo-liberal framework with new meanings through the lens of Bharadwaj. Through the zeitgeist of the child and the journey of young female protagonists as "agents of change" one may argue that the director captures the mood of the people in post-liberalized new India or after the opening of Indian economy in 1991 i.e., a nation that is stepping into a world of limitless possibilities but at the same time is threatened by the avarices like corruption, superstition and greed. It is interesting to note how Bharadwaj's narration and choice of the rural mise-en-scene becomes instrumental in foregrounding the life of ordinary Indians, stories from rural India as well as in bringing back into circulation the earthy dialects that are otherwise subsumed by the linguistic politics of mainstream Hindi Cinema. The protagonists are ordinary girl from proletariat, non-english speaking backgrounds who are neither docile nor submissive. They are curious, reasonable, solution-seekers, leaders who question "normalization of violence" and foreground the notions of "unity" and "team-building" as they seek answers for themselves as well as for the community. The narratives in turn overturn popular notions regarding girl children and put forth the imagination of a new world order,



breaking older casts by foregrounding Asian values of “sympathy, distributive justice, duty consciousness, public spiritedness and group orientation”: present them as “universalizable modern values” and locates the “self” in “composite relations within a community” (Tu 264). I conclude by extending Anna Katerine Guatirezz’s comment on Children’s Literature to the films in discussion and state that these narratives emerge as sites that “battle colonial mentality” and “produce new stories that highlight the beauty and individuality of the country”<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Bharadwaj made an entry into the Hindi film industry as a music composer for the children’s film *Abhay* or *The Fearless* in 1995. He went on to make his directorial debut seven years later with the *Makdee* or *The Web of the Witch* in 2002. He played multiple roles i.e., of co-producer, co-writer of the story, dialogue and screenplay writer and in charge of music. Similarly, we found him masterfully dabbling (mostly in collaboration with others again) all these roles in his later comedy drama, *The Blue Umbrella* (2005).

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.inuth.com/entertainment/bollywood/this-anecdote-from-vishal-bhardwajs-makdee-days-explains-why-we-make-terrible-children-films/> as accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2023

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/BollyBlindsNGossip/comments/ox87pc/interview\\_of\\_vishal\\_bharadwaj\\_just\\_before\\_the/](https://www.reddit.com/r/BollyBlindsNGossip/comments/ox87pc/interview_of_vishal_bharadwaj_just_before_the/) as accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2022

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/no-childs-play/article18437316.ece> as accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2023

<sup>v</sup> With his honey-coated tongue he tempts and traps children into buying things on loan from his shop. He sells goods only if the child can offer money, or a collateral, his/her prized possession. He is notorious among the children for never returning the collateral.

<sup>vi</sup> Chunni’s village is surrounded by trees producing the effect that it is located in the middle of forest whereas Biniya lives in a village located in the mountains.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/E1755619809000672> as accessed on 25th January, 2023.

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