

Reimagining Indian Realism: *Masaan* and *Ship of Theseus* as Cinematic Extensions of Postcolonial Literary Aesthetics

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Abstract

This paper examines Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015) and Anand Gandhi's *Ship of Theseus* (2012) as cinematic texts that extend the concerns of postcolonial Indian literature into contemporary film. Reading both films through the lenses of hybridity, subalternity, fragmented modernity, and the negotiation between tradition and change, the paper argues that Indian art cinema has inherited and reworked the aesthetic strategies of postcolonial fiction: vernacular realism, multiple-narrative structures, and the ethical interrogation of selfhood. Both films, it contends, function as literary texts in visual form, continuing the postcolonial project of representing India's plural, unresolved modernity.

Keywords

Postcolonial aesthetics, Indian realism, hybridity, subalternity, *Masaan*, *Ship of Theseus*, new Indian cinema, fragmented narrative, identity, vernacular modernity

Introduction

Indian cinema has long occupied an ambiguous space between the demands of popular entertainment and the ambitions of literary art. While mainstream Hindi cinema has historically been read as a vehicle of national fantasy and melodrama, a parallel and quieter tradition, descending from Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and the Parallel Cinema movement of the 1970s, has approached film as a form of literature: attentive to social texture, moral ambiguity, and the unfinished business of decolonization. Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015) and Anand Gandhi's *Ship of Theseus* (2012) belong to this second lineage. Though separated by genre, tone, and narrative method, both films can be read as cinematic extensions of postcolonial literary aesthetics: they inherit the concerns that animate postcolonial Indian fiction in English and in translation, caste and class stratification, the negotiation between inherited tradition and imported modernity, the fragmentation of the self under historical and technological change, and a refusal of easy narrative closure.

This paper argues that both films perform, in visual and aural form, the same aesthetic labour that postcolonial novelists have performed in prose: they render the "unhomely" condition of postcolonial subjects (Bhabha), they use vernacular specificity to resist universalizing narratives, and they structure their stories around fragments and interruptions rather than linear resolution. By situating *Masaan* and *Ship of Theseus* within postcolonial literary theory,

drawing on Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, Gayatri Spivak's account of the subaltern, and Meenakshi Mukherjee's writing on the "anxiety of Indianness" in fiction, this paper contends that Indian realist cinema of the 2010s constitutes a distinct, cinema-specific chapter in the broader postcolonial literary tradition.

Postcolonial Literary Aesthetics: A Framework

Postcolonial literature, as it developed through writers such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Mahasweta Devi, is characterised by several recurring aesthetic strategies. First, there is a preoccupation with hybridity, the mixing of languages, forms, and worldviews that Bhabha identifies as constitutive of postcolonial identity, where the colonized subject exists in a "third space" that is neither fully traditional nor fully modern (Bhabha 37). Second, postcolonial fiction frequently interrogates the position of the subaltern: those excluded from dominant structures of power, whose voice, Spivak famously asks, may not be recoverable within existing discourse (Spivak 104). Third, postcolonial narrative often abandons the single, unified plot of the realist European novel in favour of fragmented, multi-stranded, or episodic structures that mirror the discontinuities of colonial and postcolonial history. Finally, postcolonial writing is marked by what Meenakshi Mukherjee calls an "anxiety of Indianness," a self-conscious negotiation of how to represent the nation authentically without succumbing either to nostalgic essentialism or to uncritical Westernization (Mukherjee 172).

These aesthetic strategies are not confined to the written word. As Indian cinema entered its most self-consciously literary phase in the early 2010s, driven by digital production, festival circulation, and streaming distribution, filmmakers began to adopt narrative and thematic structures directly comparable to those of postcolonial fiction. *Masaan* and *Ship of Theseus*, though stylistically distinct, both demonstrate this inheritance.

It is worth noting that the relationship between postcolonial literature and postcolonial cinema in India has rarely been theorized as a continuous aesthetic tradition, even though both emerged from overlapping historical conditions: the disillusionment of the post-independence generation, the uneven arrival of economic liberalization after 1991, and the growing visibility of caste and gender politics in public discourse. Scholars such as Priya Jaikumar and Ranjani Mazumdar have examined Indian cinema's engagement with modernity and urban space, but comparatively little work situates individual festival-circuit films directly alongside the postcolonial novel as a shared aesthetic lineage. This paper attempts that comparative move by treating *Masaan* and *Ship of Theseus* not merely as sociologically interesting films but as texts that can be read with the same close-reading tools literary critics bring to the postcolonial novel: attention to narrative voice, symbolic structure, and the politics of representation.

Masaan: Vernacular Realism and the Subaltern Voice

Masaan is set in Varanasi, a city whose sacred geography, burning ghats, the Ganges, funeral pyres, becomes the film's central symbolic terrain. The film interweaves two narratives: Devi, a young woman publicly shamed and blackmailed after a consensual sexual encounter is

filmed by police, and Deepak, a young man from the Dom caste, traditionally associated with cremation work, who falls in love with an upper-caste woman, Shaalu. Both narratives dramatize the tension between individual desire and inherited social structure, a tension that lies at the heart of postcolonial Indian fiction from Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* to Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

Devi's storyline in particular stages a confrontation with the subaltern condition that Spivak theorizes. Devi is punished not for a transgression against law but for a transgression against patriarchal and caste-inflected codes of female sexuality; her voice is systematically silenced by the men around her, the police officer who films her, the father who bears the shame, the society that reads her body as a site of dishonour. The film's refusal to grant Devi a triumphant, redemptive arc, she survives, but does not "win" in any conventional narrative sense, echoes the postcolonial literary refusal to resolve subaltern suffering into comfortable moral lessons. Her trajectory recalls the fate of subaltern women in the fiction of Mahasweta Devi, where survival itself, rather than vindication, constitutes the only available victory.

Deepak's story, meanwhile, stages caste as an inescapable inheritance, quite literally: his family's occupation, burning the dead, positions him at the lowest rung of a symbolic economy that persists despite constitutional abolition of untouchability. His romance with Shaalu across caste lines evokes the "star-crossed lovers" trope familiar from English literature, but Ghaywan strips it of Shakespearean tragedy's cathartic grandeur; Shaalu's accidental death is arbitrary rather than fated, and Deepak's grief is folded into the daily, unglamorous labour of his caste occupation. This anti-melodramatic realism is itself a postcolonial aesthetic choice: it resists the temptation to aestheticize suffering, instead presenting caste violence in its mundane, structural persistence, much as Rohinton Mistry's prose refuses to spectacularize the suffering of his Dalit characters, embedding it instead in the ordinary rhythms of daily survival.

Formally, *Masaan* also enacts hybridity in Bhabha's sense. Its characters move between Sanskritized devotional idiom, associated with the ghats and rituals, and the vernacular Hindi of ordinary speech; between the traditional occupational identity of caste and the aspirational modernity represented by Devi's laptop, Deepak's engineering studies, and Shaalu's college life. The film's visual grammar, long static shots of the river juxtaposed with handheld, intimate shots of the young protagonists, stages the same "third space" Bhabha identifies in postcolonial cultural production: neither wholly traditional India nor wholly globalized India, but a liminal zone where both are always present and always in tension.

The film's use of Varanasi as setting deserves particular attention as a literary device. In much postcolonial fiction, the city functions as a palimpsest, a site inscribed with multiple, contradictory histories that resist reduction to a single narrative. Varanasi, in *Masaan*, performs precisely this function: it is simultaneously a pilgrimage site of timeless sanctity, a tourist economy catering to global visitors, and a lived, ordinary town where young people study for competitive examinations and fall in love over stolen moments at internet cafés. This layered cartography recalls the way Salman Rushdie's Bombay or Amit Chaudhuri's Calcutta

function in postcolonial fiction: not as background but as an active participant in the narrative, embodying the very hybridity and unevenness that the human characters struggle to inhabit. The recurring image of the river, simultaneously a site of cremation, of ritual purification, and of adolescent romance staged along its banks, condenses the film's central postcolonial argument: that sacred tradition and secular modernity in India are not sequential stages of development but coexistent, overlapping, and mutually constitutive conditions, much as postcolonial theory insists that colonial and indigenous epistemologies remain entangled long after formal independence.

Ship of Theseus: Fragmented Modernity and Philosophical Realism

Where *Masaan* works through vernacular, caste-inflected realism, *Ship of Theseus* extends postcolonial aesthetics through formal fragmentation and philosophical inquiry. The film is structured as a triptych: a blind photographer who regains her sight through a cornea transplant and must renegotiate her art; a monk who refuses life-saving medication tested on animals, and is forced to confront his own principles when he falls ill; and a stockbroker who discovers that his kidney transplant depended on an organ stolen from a poor labourer, and who must decide whether to pursue justice at personal cost. The three stories are connected only obliquely, through the shared motif of organ transplantation and a final revelation that binds the segments together.

This episodic, only-loosely-integrated structure is itself a postcolonial literary strategy. Just as postcolonial novels such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* resist linear historical narrative in favour of fragmented, multi-perspectival forms that mirror the ruptures of colonial history, *Ship of Theseus* resists a single unified plot, instead offering three partial, incommensurable perspectives that only cohere retrospectively. The film's title, referencing the ancient philosophical paradox of identity and continuity, becomes a metaphor for the postcolonial nation itself: a body continually replaced part by part, traditional practices exchanged for modern technologies, indigenous ways of knowing for imported scientific paradigms, and the film asks, as postcolonial theory has long asked, whether the resulting entity remains continuous with what came before, or becomes something categorically new.

The film's engagement with global bioethics, cornea transplants, animal testing, organ trafficking, also stages a distinctly postcolonial anxiety about the relationship between the global South and the apparatus of global modernity. The kidney-trafficking plot, in which the body of the poor labourer becomes literally a resource extracted for the benefit of the wealthy, restages in medical terms the extractive logic of colonialism itself: bodies and materials moving from periphery to centre, from the dispossessed to the privileged, with little possibility of restitution. This is precisely the terrain Spivak maps when she asks whether the subaltern can speak: the labourer whose kidney is stolen never narrates his own story in the film; he is represented only through the stockbroker's belated, guilt-ridden pursuit of justice, a structural silence that echoes the subaltern's absence from the historical record in postcolonial theory.

At the same time, the monk's storyline stages the tension between inherited tradition, Jain philosophy, non-violence, ascetic renunciation, and the imported modern episteme of pharmaceutical science, echoing Mukherjee's "anxiety of Indianness": can a specifically Indian ethical tradition survive contact with globalized medical modernity, or must it be diluted, translated, or abandoned? The photographer's segment, meanwhile, interrogates the relationship between authentic perception and technological mediation, asking whether art produced through a body altered by global medical technology, a donor cornea, implicitly from a foreign or unknown source, can remain "hers," a question that maps directly onto postcolonial debates about cultural authenticity in an era of globalized artistic production.

The film's use of long, static takes and minimal dialogue, a style often associated with international "slow cinema," might initially seem to distance *Ship of Theseus* from the vernacular, orality-inflected traditions of Indian storytelling. Yet this apparent cosmopolitanism is itself a postcolonial gesture in Bhabha's sense: the film adopts an international arthouse idiom precisely in order to smuggle in distinctly local philosophical material, Jain metaphysics, questions of dharma, debates about ahimsa, into a form legible to global festival audiences. This is analogous to the strategy postcolonial novelists have long used with the English language itself: adopting the colonizer's form, or, in this case, a globally circulating cinematic grammar, and "making it their own," in Rushdie's well-known formulation, by inflecting it with specifically Indian concerns. The film's hybridity, then, operates not only at the level of content, tradition versus modern science, but at the level of form, international arthouse aesthetics versus indigenous philosophical inquiry, doubling the hybridity that Bhabha identifies as constitutive of postcolonial cultural production.

Comparative Synthesis: Two Cinematic Grammars, One Postcolonial Inheritance

Read together, *Masaan* and *Ship of Theseus* demonstrate that postcolonial literary aesthetics are not bound to a single generic form. *Masaan* works in the register of social realism inherited from writers like Anand and Mistry: it is concerned with the body as marked by caste, gender, and social shame, and its aesthetic strategy is one of restraint, ordinariness, and the refusal of melodrama. *Ship of Theseus* works in a more explicitly philosophical and cosmopolitan register, closer to Rushdie's magical-realist fragmentation or Ghosh's essayistic, multi-stranded structures: it is concerned with the body as a site of medical and philosophical inquiry, and its aesthetic strategy is one of digression, paradox, and open-ended metaphysical questioning.

Yet both films share a deeper structural commitment that marks them as postcolonial texts rather than merely "Indian" or "art-house" texts. Both resist the redemptive arc of much popular cinema, in which suffering is resolved into moral clarity or emotional catharsis. Both use the body, Devi's shamed body, Deepak's caste-marked body, the labourer's stolen kidney, the monk's failing organs, the photographer's transplanted eyes, as the primary site where social and historical forces become legible, in a manner directly continuous with the postcolonial novel's frequent use of the body as historical text, as in Rushdie's Saleem Sinai, whose body is "handcuffed to history." And both films are structured around unresolved

hybridity: the coexistence, without synthesis, of tradition and modernity, of the sacred and the technological, of the local and the global.

It is also worth observing that both films depart from postcolonial fiction's traditional preoccupation with the colonial encounter itself, the direct confrontation between British and Indian, colonizer and colonized, in favour of what might be called a "second-generation" postcolonial concern: the internal fractures of independent India, where the more urgent antagonisms are no longer primarily with a departed colonial power but with structures of caste, capital, and biomedical globalization that have outlived formal empire. In this sense, *Masaan* and *Ship of Theseus* extend rather than simply repeat the postcolonial literary project, updating its central questions for an India shaped by liberalization, digital connectivity, and global bioethical networks, much as later postcolonial novelists such as Aravind Adiga and Kiran Desai shifted the genre's focus from anti-colonial nationalism toward the inequities of globalized, post-liberalization India.

This shared aesthetic vocabulary suggests that the postcolonial literary project, begun in English-language and vernacular Indian fiction in the decades following independence, has not concluded but has migrated into new media. Just as the postcolonial novel adapted the form of the European realist novel to represent distinctly Indian, and distinctly postcolonial, experiences of fragmentation and hybridity, so too has the postcolonial art film adapted the grammar of international festival cinema, long takes, elliptical editing, ambient sound design, to the same representational task. *Masaan* and *Ship of Theseus* thus occupy a position analogous to that of the postcolonial novel in the 1980s and 1990s: they are formally sophisticated, internationally circulated texts that nonetheless remain rooted in specifically Indian social and philosophical concerns, refusing to flatten those concerns for a global audience even as they seek global recognition, both films, notably, achieved significant international festival success, at Cannes and internationally respectively.

Conclusion

Masaan and *Ship of Theseus* demonstrate that the aesthetic strategies developed by postcolonial Indian literature, hybridity, subaltern silence, fragmented narrative form, and the anxious negotiation of tradition and modernity, have found a robust continuation in contemporary Indian art cinema. Rather than treating these films as isolated examples of a nebulous "Indian indie" sensibility, this paper has argued that they are best understood as cinematic extensions of a literary tradition: they inherit its concerns, adapt its strategies to a visual medium, and extend its unfinished interrogation of what it means to represent India's plural, unresolved modernity. In doing so, they suggest that postcolonial aesthetics is not a historically bounded literary movement but an ongoing mode of representation, capable of migrating across media even as the specific anxieties it addresses, caste, gender, bodily autonomy, the relationship between local tradition and global modernity, remain stubbornly unresolved in Indian public life. Future scholarship might extend this analysis to other works of contemporary Indian cinema, mapping more fully the contours of what could be called a postcolonial cinematic realism.

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