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Framing Childhood: A Study Of Global And Indian Films

Mr. Ashish Verma

PhD Research Scholar,

Department of Mass Communication

Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, Hisar, Haryana, India

Dr. M.R. Patra

Associate Professor,

Department of Mass Communication

Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, Hisar, Haryana, India

ABSTRACT

The representation of children and childhood in cinema has become a central point in the discourse on children's films. As discussed by Bazalgette and Staples (1995), the term "children's films" can either refer to films that feature children and are intended for a general audience, or to films that are explicitly made for a younger demographic. Despite the state-controlled narratives discussed later in this paper, a new trend is visible in Indian cinema, where portrayals of children and families deviate from traditional depictions. The emergence of disharmonious parent-child relationships and single-parent households in Indian films indicates a significant shift in the portrayal of family dynamics. This evolution suggests a changing perception of what constitutes an "ideal" Indian family, and may also challenge the dominant national identity discourse. Additionally, these films highlight the persistent issues faced by many children in Indian society, questioning the traditional roles assigned to children and families.

Keywords: Cinema, Portrayal, Children, India, Hindi

Introduction

The appearance of children and childhood in films forms a part of the larger ongoing debate around children's cinema. Bazalgette and Staples (1995) define children's films in two ways: they may either be films created for a general audience, but which happen to include children, or films specifically produced for a child audience. However, this definition remains open to debate, as there are several films featuring children in central roles, but which are not primarily meant for children. Andrews (2000) highlights this issue, stating that not all children's films are solely about children, and not all films watched by children are

categorized as children's films. This suggests that the concept of children's films is influenced by several competing perspectives.

As Andrews (2000) explains, there are films that target children, films about childhood, and films that children watch regardless of whether they were originally intended for young audiences. This makes it challenging to establish a clear definition of "children's films." Moreover, Buckingham (1995) suggests that children's films, like children's television, are not made by children but for children. Therefore, these films reflect not the desires or fantasies of children but the adult perspective of what childhood should represent.

Buckingham (1995) both underline the complexities of children's representation in cinema. These films often showcase children's experiences, but they do so from the perspective of adults, particularly filmmakers. The child becomes a symbol of a broader societal issue or ideology, often reflecting adult concerns. For instance, he sees the presence of children in cinema as a reflection of a para-social or para-historical order, where children do not simply belong to society but are placed on the periphery of the narrative. These representations are often used to evoke certain emotions or to symbolize larger truths about society or the human experience (Kelleher, 1998).

The Representation of Children in World Cinema

The portrayal of children in cinema has been heavily influenced by traditional notions of childhood as a world of innocence. In European Christian tradition, children were often seen as irrational beings, sometimes even as little monsters. The Romantic movement, on the other hand, portrayed children as innocent and uncorrupted by the flaws of adulthood (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 1995). Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) famously emphasized the purity and natural innocence of children but also recognized that this innocence could be compromised by societal and cultural influences (Konigsberg, 2000).

Jenkins argues that childhood is often conceptualized as a domain distinct from adult problems, and that children serve as symbols of both fleeting life and the potential for a hopeful future. He also believes that children should be viewed as active agents in their own lives, with the ability to construct their own culture (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004).

In Hollywood, the portrayal of children has often revolved around innocence. From the era of *Shirley Temple* in *Little Miss Marker* (1934) to *Jonathan Lipnicki* in *Jerry Maguire* (1996), children are consistently depicted as pure and inherently good (Konigsberg, 2000). Disney films are especially known for idealizing childhood and family life, presenting a version of the world that aligns with traditional values and appeals to a global audience. Disney's films, by emphasizing traditional family structures and gender roles, reinforce these ideals. Tanner (2003) points out that Disney movies often present an idealized family life but simplify the complex concept of family and gender roles, portraying characters in traditional molds.

Critics such as Giroux (2004) argue that while Disney films create a magical and innocent world for children, they also reinforce conservative ideologies, including male dominance and racial stereotypes. Steven Spielberg's films share these traits, often portraying boys as innocent but vulnerable to the harshness of the adult world, while female characters are relegated to secondary roles (Mann, 2005).

In contrast, early British silent films presented children as rebellious figures, often playing pranks and challenging authority (Sobchack, 1989). These films depicted children as symbols of defiance, representing a challenge to the social order. Sobchack (1989) argues that British silent cinema used children as symbols of power, with their rebellion representing a critique of the upper classes and authority figures.

The Politicization of Children in Cinema: A Comparative Analysis

The politicization of children in cinema is also evident in animated films from the U.S. and Japan. Spigel (1999) notes that American cartoons often use children to symbolize national identity and American values, while Japanese anime uses children to convey aspects of Japanese identity. Yoshida (2004) suggests that anime has been instrumental in promoting Japanese cultural imperialism in Asia, with its characters often embodying a statelessness that disguises their Japanese origins.

In Iranian cinema, children have been used as a strategy to discuss sensitive political and social issues while circumventing government censorship. After the Iranian Revolution, censorship laws severely restricted political discourse, but filmmakers found ways to portray sensitive topics through child characters. Sadr (2002) points out that children in Iranian cinema often act as stand-ins for adults, giving filmmakers the ability to explore controversial subjects. Mir-Hosseini (2000) similarly explains that children became vehicles for expressing human emotions when depictions of love and women were restricted in Iranian films during the early 1980s.

Both Italian neo-realism and Brazilian cinema have used children as central figures to explore complex social realities. In these films, children are depicted not as innocent beings but as individuals confronting the harshness of real-world problems. Traverso (2005) notes that Brazilian cinema often portrays children as independent and resilient despite being parentless, while Italian neo-realism depicts the struggles of children within the family unit. Fisher (2001), discussing Deleuze's ideas, argues that in Italian cinema, children are portrayed as both weak observers and as resilient figures who transcend the passive roles typically assigned to them.

In early German DEFA films, children were depicted as both a social threat and as essential to the stability of society (Fisher, 2001). This duality reflects a broader societal tension, with children symbolizing both the breakdown and reinforcement of traditional social structures. Fisher (2001) further contends that in these films, children are often used to highlight the conservative values of bourgeois society, especially in relation to masculinity and family dynamics.

Similarly, Chinese cinema has portrayed children as political symbols, often used to construct a model of ideal citizenship. Donald (2005) explains that Chinese films frequently depict children as successful citizens who contribute to the future of the nation. These portrayals emphasize the role of children in China's economic and political reforms, often focusing on the emotional and symbolic representation of the nation through child characters.

French cinema, on the other hand, often presents children as victims of loss, either through personal tragedy or their relationships with adults. Hayward (1999) argues that these representations are used to explore broader political and social issues, such as nationalism and family dynamics. Powrie (2005) adds that in French cinema, children are often used to question the very nature of the family, posing existential questions about whether the family is a place of protection or destruction.

The portrayal of children in global cinema challenges the romanticized notion of childhood as a period of innocence. In contemporary European films, the image of the missing or suffering child is used to represent a lost sense of desire or origin (Wilson, 2005). Additionally, the depiction of "bad" children in some films deconstructs the traditional image of childhood as inherently good (Jackson, 2000). Overall, the representation of children in cinema varies widely, but consistently emphasizes the importance of children's presence in film as a means of exploring larger societal issues.

The Representation of Children in Indian Cinema

The portrayal of children in Indian cinema has long faced challenges despite significant political support for the genre. Historically, children's films in India have been sporadic, with production often being poorly organized and inconsistent. Many of these films were dismissed by critics and the audience as curiosities rather than serious artistic endeavours. This neglect can be attributed to a range of issues, including the fragmented structure of the Indian film industry, language barriers, hesitation from financial backers, and a deep-seated cultural resistance to content geared towards children. Such resistance has only recently begun to wane as Indian cinema increasingly embraces stories centered around children and youth.

Various regional film industries in India—ranging from Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu to Kannada, Marathi, and Malayalam—have experimented with the children's film genre. However, it is Bollywood, based in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), which has produced the majority of children's films. Still, only a few have gained iconic status. These include *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (Satyajit Ray, 1969), *Haathi Mere Saathi* (M. A. Thirumugham, 1971), *Rani Aur Lalpari* (Ravikant Nagaich, 1975), *Safed Haathi* (Tapan Sinha, 1977), *Masoom* (Shekhar Kapur, 1983), *Mr. India* (Shekhar Kapur, 1987), *Halo* (Santosh Sivan, 1996), *Makdee* (Vishal Bhardwaj, 2002), *Hanuman* (V. G. Samant and Milind Ukey, 2005), and *Taare Zameen Par* (Aamir Khan, 2007). Interestingly, only *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* was not made in Hindi, and several of these films were not initially intended to be children's movies but were later retroactively classified as such.

Most of these films employ the famous "masala" style, a blend of various cinematic elements like song, dance, romance, and high emotional content, underscoring their commercial aspirations. However, the non-commercial sector, led by the Children's Film Society, India (CFSI), continues to play a significant role in the industry.

A key debate surrounding children's films in India is whether they should primarily be educational, aimed at morally and psychologically preparing children for adult life, or purely for entertainment and profit. The Children's Film Society (CFSI) has been a strong advocate of the former perspective. It was a cornerstone of national cinema established in the mid-1950s, initially crafted films that reinforced traditional social structures and patriarchal family dynamics. Throughout its early decades, the organization maintained a decidedly didactic approach to filmmaking. By the early 2000s, however, a remarkable shift emerged: children's cinema began adopting a more globalized, spectacle-driven model of family entertainment that diverged significantly from its previous pedagogical orientation.

This transformation reflects deeper currents within Indian society. Children's films are no longer viewed merely as instructional tools but are increasingly recognized as complex cultural texts that contribute to identity formation and social discourse. The genre has progressively incorporated more universal narrative themes and elevated production standards, enabling broader audience engagement and critical recognition. While the fundamental debate persists—whether children's cinema should prioritize education or entertainment—the emerging consensus suggests a more nuanced approach that acknowledges the genre's multifaceted potential.

The trajectory of children's cinema in India offers a compelling lens for understanding broader sociocultural dynamics. Films like *Taare Zameen Par* exemplify this evolution, addressing sophisticated themes such as educational psychology and children's inner experiences. This shift represents more than a mere aesthetic transformation; it signals a profound societal recognition of children as complex, autonomous subjects worthy of substantive cinematic representation.

Conclusion

This research explored the multifaceted representation of children in cinema, challenging traditional perceptions of childhood as a realm of pure innocence. Contrary to Romantic conceptualizations, cinematic portrayals increasingly depict children as complex social actors capable of embodying significant cultural, political, and societal narratives. Global cinema demonstrates that children are not passive subjects, but dynamic symbols that can represent rebellion, systemic hardship, and evolving political ideologies.

The study revealed a profound shift in how children are conceptualized on screen. Rather than maintaining simplistic, sentimentalized portrayals, contemporary filmmakers utilize child characters as sophisticated narrative devices that provide critical insights into broader social dynamics. These representations transcend

mere entertainment, functioning as nuanced commentaries on cultural transformation, power structures, and societal evolution.

In the context of Indian cinema, the representation of children reflects a complex trajectory marked by industry fragmentation and cultural negotiation. Recent cinematic trends indicate a significant transformation, with filmmakers increasingly challenging traditional familial narratives. These emerging representations explore more nuanced parent-child relationships, moving beyond idealized depictions to reveal the intricate emotional and social complexities of familial interactions.

The ongoing discourse within Indian cinema centres on the fundamental purpose of children's films: whether they should prioritize educational content or entertainment value. This debate underscores a broader recognition of children's films as critical cultural texts that offer profound social commentary, reflecting the dynamic cultural and political landscape of contemporary India.

The research emphasized that children's cinematic representations are far more than narrative devices. They serve as powerful mechanisms for understanding societal values, challenging established social structures, and articulating complex cultural negotiations. By examining these representations, researchers can gain deeper insights into how societies conceptualize childhood, familial relationships, and social transformation.

Global cinema demonstrates that children are not merely passive subjects but active symbolic agents capable of reflecting intricate social, political, and cultural dynamics. The evolving representation of children on screen offers a critical lens through which to examine broader societal changes, challenging traditional perceptions and expanding our understanding of childhood as a complex, multidimensional social construct.

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