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Short Communication

Ontological Hybridity and Social Movements in Bihar: A Narrative Analysis of Gangs of Wasseypur and Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi

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Abstract

The article is divided into four sections. The first is an introduction of the analysis of social movement theory and the definition of Ontological Hybridity as a narrative strategy in describing social movement and social ontology. This is followed by the analysis of two films Gangs of Wasseypur and Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi, which are set in Bihar and attempt to narrate Bihar's social movements through an ontologically hybrid lens. The ontological hybridity in these films discusses Bihar's violent social churnings through a hybridity of character arcs, identities and socio-political transformations that impact various social formulations in complex and interconnected ways. This is then followed by a comparative assessment of their hybridities alongside their engagement and impact with their intended audiences is discussed, leading to a conclusion on how ontologically hybrid narratives of a social movement emerge as a fuller, engaging and socially informative mode of description and recreation of social movements.

Keywords

Bihar Cinema, Ontological Hybridity, Social Movements in India, Violence in Film Narratives.

Main Text

Social Movement Theory and Hybridity

Social movement theories are families of theories looking at how social movements develop. Theories of study of social movements have entered the area of postcolonial and post structural theorisation where tradition is assumed to provide only a 'partial identification', and cultural temporalities and multiple 'locations' of an individual within the cultural complex leading to complex identification and action within society (Bhabha, 2012). The most recent paradigmatic arena of social movement theory has been the emergence of theories looking at postcolonial and poststructuralist frames of emergence of social movements (Bhabha, 2012).

Two movies have been selected – Gangs of Wasseypur (2 parts) and Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi (HKA) – for the observation of narration, that is, the art of narrating society. The reason for this selection may have been the commonly running thread among them used for depicting the society they are set in, Bihar. That thread is violence. It is as ubiquitous as it is invisible and ethereal. Of actual screen times, may be a good chunk of both movies is dedicated to formal acts of violence – in the form of murder, rioting, theft, state-sponsored violence, sexual violence, etc. However, this forms only a part of the forms of violence that films collectively manage to bring out among the structures, both personal and political, in

Bihar. And it is because of this very reason of not sticking to violence as a unilinear and gratuitous tool of observation of society, that the narrators are able to convey ontological hybridity in narrating (or rather, writing) about the social movements that they observe in these two films.

I utilize a definition of Ontological Hybridity emanating from critique of how dominant public spheres are imagined and articulated from the perspective of the privileged minority, and how the location of culture is envisioned by uniform centralizing narratives of the nation in writings (Fraser 1970; Bhabha, 2012). This is reflective of the post-colonial turn in social movement theory which also posits that emerging critique of dominant social articulation must come from the 'majority world' (Cox et al., 2017).

Tracing a History of Bihar Itself – Ontologically Simplistic Views

Mention must be made here that the parts of Bihar that Gangs of Wasseypur is set in, are no more the administrative parts of the state of Bihar, but that of the newly formed state of Jharkhand. However, the course of the film is mostly set in the 20th century history of the state, which puts the parts in erstwhile Bengal before independence in 1947, and in Bihar later. This, then, also forms a course in historiography of the society as it moves from one rule to another, from one administrative division to another, and extending the ontology, from one form of violence to another. HKA, on the other hand, remains historically limited in its jurisdiction, tackling mostly a phase close to and after the National Emergency imposed in the country in 1975.

In academic literature, most of the historiography is either singularly economic (Ajmer, 2020; Kumar, 2010; Das, 1992); political (Minato, 2011; Sajjad, 2014; Verma, 1991); or social (Verma, 2019; Shilpi, 2021). These trace the history of Bihar's society as an economic entity facing agrarian feudalism and industrial stagnation, or political exclusion and governmental failure, or social exclusion and violent social revolts. The economic growth rates, educational and healthcare attainment, political representation, and crime statistics are used to judge the performance of the state with respect to its counterparts in India since or sometimes even before independence. Most of these represent a laggard economy, non-responsive governmental structure, and a distressed society which has produced the largest amounts of out-migration to all industrialised states of the country (Nupur & Youkta, 2020).

Quantitative tables and qualitative datasets are all abundant in tracing the histories of popular dissatisfaction or governmental apathy in a state where criminal activities and violence in daily life abound. The gross incomes have remained below national average, the unemployment and disease statistics have remained above, and the gender and caste-based violence statistics show Bihar to be a 'microcosm of the Indian scenario' (Verma, 2019). However, these studies and narrations remain problematic as they are ontologically simplistic. They trace a history not just from above, but from a 'thoroughbred' perspective that takes one to conclusions which are non-hybrid and linear.

Emerging Ontological Hybridity as A Strategy to Document a Social Movement in Richer Text

I define the emerging strategies that both films apply to depict and bring out Bihar society's complex socio-cultural tapestry as Ontological Hybridity. My definition looks at Ontological Hybridity in writing or depicting a social movement as a strategy in which *'the writer (or narrator) makes a strategic decision to foreground 'subaltern counter publics' and their multifaceted negotiations with their social location as a richer and more reflective tapestry of social churn.'* This definition derives from Nancy Fraser's (1970) definition of subaltern counter publics and their 'parallel discursive arenas' which offer direction for the emergence of 'participatory parity' to the public sphere, and Homi Bhabha's (2012) polemic to the 'nation narrative' as exclusive of its people and their complex temporalities, which the nation presupposes as a priori, in his seminal work 'The Location of Culture'.

How the two films selected reflect this ontological hybridity is also different from each other but similar in its ultimate reflexivity and strategic biasing via shining the historical light on cross-temporal, subaltern and intersectional marginalities and negotiations that are embedded in any social situation which experiences a churning. Bihar's social history is then seen through the richer lens of hybrid locations that its characters occupy in different spatio-temporal niches. They are in a position of political or cultural power in one instance, while remaining acutely vulnerable and becoming so to social churn and marginality in another. How then do individuals, collectives and the social movement as a whole find their identities, social realities, life worlds and priorities challenged, hijacked or reinstated is how the films unfold their stories. In doing so, they thus offer an ontologically hybrid and rich text on which to view Bihar's social movement. I reflect next on the specific hybrid strategies that the two films utilise to this effect.

Wasseypur – Hybridity Through Spirals of Narrative

At the very beginning of the two-part narrative, the narrator tells us that – 'the story of Wasseypur is a bit twisted'. These 'twists', are what bring hybridity to our understanding of the social movement later. The first such twist is the very beginning of the story. The reason for the beginning of the conflict among the Muslim population in Wasseypur, isn't the feudal or age-old social divides as many simplistic narratives of violence may have us believe; the narrator here mentions how the British forcibly occupied and removed rice fields from Dhanbad in order to begin mining coal – to power railways and factories that ran on coal.

It is to set the core of many conflicts to come. Food security and the rising prices of grain make up the very first conflict when the two core characters, Shahid Khan and Sultan Qureshi come into conflict over stealing grains from the British trains in the area. The forced displacement of people from farms and into coal mines would make up another source of conflict. It would even set up a conflict over ever-reducing settlement space as more and more land would become uninhabitable due to mining in Bihar and later Jharkhand. The question thus arises – are the people lawless, violent, and encroaching by nature in Bihar? Or has 'nature' itself been collapsed to the extent of pushing people into conflict over poor quality and reducing resources? Or has the shift in natural settings of agriculture into industrialisation made older skills irrelevant overnight and forced people into out-migration or criminal activities in the absence of any jobs or a social support for their skillsets?

Another question on ontology it raises is the question of gender and gender-based violence. Since murder remains the common mode of protest, rebellion and vengeance, sexual violence and objectification of women becomes a common tool of assertion and existence in this society. The lack of narrative for a woman is seen in a shot where a female character sits voiceless as her husband monologues about his targets reaching a place where he'll have to go, and then leaving her on the verge of words without a glance at the person he's just married. Violence is also visible as a mode in intimate relationships when a female character questions her being turned into a 'child-bearing' factory – a product of the need of 'replaceable hands' that add to the family labour in a feudal society (Petersen, 1988). This also breeds unemployment and further violent action by those dissatisfied with their state of affairs – many times against women.

A question over government or private ownership of resources is also raised by the narrator. When the government owned mines post-independence, the biggest target of the mafia was to occupy labour union posts in order to steal membership fees and salaries as union leaders. But after the Emergency, a critique of government inaction emerged as the profits drained from goyt-owned ventures. In the wave of privatization in the country, efficiency and professionalism was expected to be the order of the day. However, as the narrator dictates, the new field of entry for the mafia becomes the contractual work being auctioned by the government. The question remains – was the government ownership forcing inefficient operation of resources? Or did the privately contracted businesses lead to a fresh wave of violence and monopolization?

It looks at technological change in Wasseypur through the eyes on newer guns and gun violence, the use of mobile phones to track victims and misuse of online auctioneering websites of the govt to trace and inhibit fair auctions and raise extortion rackets. The narrator doesn't lose the gaze on Wasseypur as a populated space, when areas become contested among the state and the populace; the people are seen both as active agents of rebellion and passive observers of the destruction of their own collective resources at the hands of a few.

Ontological shifts also carry a distinct self-awareness among the people regarding their locale, and characters too reflect an acute cynicism of the decadence that hits the town due to personal ambitions. A character does lament the fact that 'everyone has a movie playing in their head, of which they are the hero; and this country can go nowhere until this exists'. To write about Wasseypur, the narrator describes as many of these stories out loud as possible; which brings ontological hybridity to the viewer to unearth a complex quality to the 'existence' of the place.

These stories are given no judgement or hidden under analysis that obscures the characters own reading of their lives, but are placed under foregrounds and backgrounds of the economic and social fluidities which helps the viewer enrich their analysis of the location in toto. Ontological hybridity emerges from the fact that stories are anchored, not by space or time, but by individuals' own assessments of space or time, which allows meanings to be unlearned and relearned by the viewer through perspective and through a movement across narrative arcs through individuals existing forward and behind in the space-time, like a dialectic spiral of the locale.

Hazaron Khwaishein Aisi (HKA) – Ethics of Care to Achieve Fluid Ontologies

Three distinct narrators exist in this retelling of the Bihar students' movement which inspired state repression in the form of the Emergency in 1975 in India (Govindacharya, 2015). There exists however, a common thread among the three. They all come from relatively well-off land-owning families in New Delhi, and the Bihar student movement remains a

distant and alien social action to them, even by the end of the narrative. One character never even indulges in the rebellion, staying committed to 'making money' in the city till the end.

But Bihar comes into their lives as a site of revolution for one, care for another, and as a farce for the third. There is narrative idealism, where characters always seem to have a way out of the 'village life' and an anchoring pillar to go back to in case they get 'too deep in trouble'. There is also a problematic Gandhian analysis of the caste issue, with the Dalit population being referred to as 'Harijans' by a Marxist narrator.

However, what lends ontological hybridity to the narration is the narrative arc of Geeta Rao, the only female narrator in the movie, who actively uses the Ethics of Care in creating meanings from her world (Cocks, 2006). The ethics of care is used in many scenarios by the narrator in active dialogue where characters try and understand the behaviour of the world around them through a larger lens of 'what matters', while Geeta consistently asserts – 'It is not about you'.

Questions are raised when a rebellion by the Dalit households against a landlord when his son has sexually abused a person from their community is withheld when the landlord suffers a heart attack. The community comes together to save a life then. The narrator is then puzzled himself as to the motivations of the community, and questions their belief in the revolution itself. However, the same community comes to his rescue against the state machinery when it desperately searches for 'miscreants' during the Emergency days.

How does one understand Bihar then in this movement? Is it through its community action? Or through the action of the state machinery that represses its own citizens, sometimes even by a threat of violence and rape? Is it through the leader who indulges in searching for his grandchild's dog while people come begging to his door? Or through the students themselves who feel idealistic, then pragmatic, and by the end, cynical of the whole scenario?

At the end, as Geeta quotes, it's not about any one of them. Ethics of care is used actively by the women participating in the rebellion to protest, but continue to care for their comrades and depict resilient non-violence in the face of oppression. However, they don't get drawn to any one narrative understanding of Bihar, as do the two other narrators. Geeta and women like her in the rebellion maintain ontological fluidity, even challenging the students in their quest for revolution and at the same time, supporting each other in raising a banner of their own needs. It still remains out of grasp of a monolithic narrative as one narrator remarks at the very end – 'I am studying medicine now. Maybe the mysteries of the human body are less complicated than what we encountered'.

The Engagement - Audience Perceptions and Larger Socio-Cultural Location of the Two Films

Both Gangs and HKA occupied important public spaces and discursive niches after their release, but in comparatively different contexts. Indian cinema's engagement with the socio-political realities of North India, particularly Bihar and its surrounding regions, has historically oscillated between sensationalist crime dramas and austere parallel cinema. However, Anurag Kashyap's Gangs of Wasseypur (2012) and Sudhir Mishra's Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi (2003) represent two distinct paradigm shifts in how films interact with the public sphere. While Gangs of Wasseypur erupted as a massy pop-culture phenomenon that redefined the representation of Muslim society in North India, Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi (HKA) navigated an independent cinema trajectory.

To understand the divergent public engagement of these two films, we can turn to the cognitive film theory of David Bordwell, specifically his frameworks outlining Classical/Genre Narration versus Art-Cinema Narration. Bordwell (1979) posits that a film's formal structure directly dictates the spectator's cognitive engagement—how the audience builds the narrative, processes cues, and ultimately internalizes the film's cultural meaning.

Through a Bordwellian lens, Gangs of Wasseypur utilizes the robust, familiar scaffolding of classical genre filmmaking—specifically the generational gangster epic. Bordwell argues that mainstream genre films rely on strong cause-and-effect logic, goal-oriented protagonists, and kinetic sensory cues to ensure immediate, visceral audience engagement. Kashyap hijacked this massy cinematic form to deliver something radically subaltern.

Because the audience was anchored by familiar cognitive cues of revenge, action, and dark humor, the film could successfully introduce a hyper-local, deeply authentic socio-cultural milieu without alienating the viewer. In doing so, GoW set a massive cultural moment in motion. For the first time in mainstream Indian cinema, the lived, gritty reality of the North Indian Muslim was centered in the public sphere.

In stark contrast, Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi operates firmly within Bordwell's framework of Art-Cinema Narration. According to Bordwell, art cinema intentionally subverts classical cause-and-effect. It privileges psychological ambiguity, historical realism, and a lack of neat resolutions, demanding a different, more reflective mode of cognitive engagement from the spectator.

HKA does not offer the visceral catharsis of a massy film. Because its narrative form requires active intellectual decoding rather than passive consumption, its immediate box-office footprint was niche. However, this very complex, reflective nature gave the film an immense institutional and historical weight. Its objective realism allowed it to transcend entertainment and become a historical document.

This is powerfully evidenced by its inclusion in the Indian educational curriculum. In the NCERT Class 12 Political Science textbook, Politics in India since Independence, HKA is explicitly referenced on page 125 during the discussion of the Emergency. The textbook utilizes the film as a pedagogical tool to help young students grasp the severe ramifications of the suspension of democratic rights, state violence, and the fracturing of youth idealism in the 1970s.

Conclusion

Wasseypur and HKA are unique, in that they both document a subaltern as the central flagpole of the Bihar movements. One uses the Muslim population, while the other the Dalit populace. However, the protagonist narrators of HKA are from the landed classes, with luxurious upbringings and fallback options to go to in case they 'fail'. Characters in Wasseypur are not formally educated in most cases, as their situation demands that they join as earning hands as quickly as possible, and thus, even take up jobs to clean toilets in trains. However, both offer a strand of understanding that makes up 'thick description' of their location (Luhrmann, 2001).

In performing these thick descriptions, the narrators also bring out weaves and strands of social networks that act as glue, or prompt, or even barricade to certain forms of action or inaction chosen by people involved in these social movements (Diani, 2003). Moments of subaltern confusion and obfuscation can also be documented this way, even moving beyond the subaltern centricity of the narrative to an 'assemblage' narrative to understand how hybrid social assemblages all interact to produce subalternality for some or dominance for others (Rankin, 2011). In it, it might also hold the key to assessing how the structures of dominance-oppression coupling may be shed altogether to end the subalternality as a natural ontological product of all social systems.

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