

The Twist In The Tale

Aditya Seth

Film Maker/ Academic/ Consultant

Abstract

We are surrounded by & constantly engaging with stories whether we like it or not. Stories which come in the form of advertising, news, information, entertainment, make believe & some even impart knowledge. But are we able to engage with all of them or do we even wish to engage with all of them? Is it possible to completely comprehend every story in its entirety? Are we able to sieve one from the other or is it all a strange complex mix of narratives running parallel and confusingly intertwined? What do we make of this information overload considering our attention spans these days are 20 seconds at best because as a society we all seem to be suffering from collective Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder popularly known as ADHD. Despite all this we all do engage, believe & invest our time & effort in stories. We are constantly buying into ideas & information sometimes with cynicism, sometimes with complete faith & often times with a total & absolute suspension of our disbelief especially when we want Amitabh Bachchan to beat a tiger in hand to hand combat for instance. And if you ask Why the answer is simple we all love to be entertained! There is nothing like entering a world of make believe, to live a fantasy, be transported to La La Land, go on impossible adventures, be heroic, sing, dance, vanquish & romance with gay abandon & live the story thus escaping from the boring, repetitive drudgery of our mundane lives. Although this may seem a cliché, it is true. However interesting our lives maybe living someone else's vicariously seems more interesting always. And if we talk about the future of storytelling I believe we are living that Future, Future is Today & as I explore the narrative form & content I believe the future of the narrative structure especially dramatic narrative shall be determined by how we consume those narratives / stories, henceforth.

Keywords

Storytelling, dramatic narrative, Cinema, short fiction, Future, Market, consumption.

1. What is a story?

It's an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment, knowledge or information & therefore story telling describes the social and cultural activity of sharing stories, sometimes with improvisation, theatrics, or embellishment. Every culture has its own stories or narratives, which are also shared as a means of education, cultural preservation or instilling moral values. Telling is also narration which brings us to the realm of dramatic narrative wherein crucial elements of stories and storytelling include drama, plot, characters and points of view.

The term "storytelling" can refer in a narrow sense specifically to oral storytelling which comes from the oral tradition and also in a looser sense to techniques used in other media to unfold or disclose the narrative of a story.

Oral tradition is information passed down through the generations by word of mouth that is not written down. This includes historical and cultural traditions, literature and law. The transmission is through speech or song and may include folktales, ballads, chants, prose or verses. In this way, it is possible for a society to transmit oral history, oral literature, oral law and other knowledge across generations without a writing system, or in parallel to a writing system. Religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, for example, have used an oral tradition, in parallel to a writing system, to transmit their canonical scriptures, secular knowledge such as Sushruta Samhita, hymns and mythologies from one generation to the next.

2. Dramatic narrative

A narrative is a sequence of connected events, whether real or fictional. The definition of narrative is the same as that of a story. There are many types of narratives, such as non-fiction (documentary, journalism, memoir, biography, etc.) & fiction such as prose, drama, and some forms of poetry, songs, and video games.

My endeavor is to primarily deal with the dramatic narrative by demystifying & analyzing through examples both the realms of non-fiction as well as fiction storytelling.

3. The 3 Essentials of a dramatic Story / narrative

- Premise
- Conflict
- Resolution

This is known as the three act structure which originates from theatre which gave birth to Cinema which recorded stories through a Camera and further projected them on a screen.

4. What is the twist in the tale

It all began with the Lumiere brothers, French inventors and pioneer manufacturers of photographic equipment who devised an early motion-picture camera and projector called the Cinématographe ("cinema" is derived from this name). 'Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat' is considered to be the first motion picture in modern history (although more an experiment from the Lumière-brothers to use their 'invention' of film, it shows a train arriving at a passenger station). Popular legend has it that, when this film was shown, the first-night audience fled the cafe in terror, fearing being run over by the "approaching" train. There was no differentiation between non-fiction & fiction initially as all film was only recording events in real time. It was only much later that the understanding of reel time came in & compression of time & space became an integral part of cinematic storytelling & fiction storytelling became the norm rather than the exception.

Stories come from around us & are a reflection of what captures the imagination of society. Today's socio – economic narrative is dominated by New India, development, progress, a corruption free state on the one hand & demonetization, GST, Nationalism,

Terrorism & Us vs Them on the other. And as we consume these stories through Social Media I.e, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc all of us exercise our need to be opinion makers. Since we neither have the time nor the inclination to read most of the stories we consume are in the form of short videos. When we engage with the audio & the visual on our devices, mostly smart phones, we tend to believe what we see because after all “seeing is believing”! But therein lies the danger because we tend to forget that all news may not be fake news but all information is certainly not good information & each time we forward a text or a clip we are perpetuating an opinion & influencing the next person who engages with what we have forwarded. It is very difficult to be able to decipher whether the clip reaching us is a plant a plug or mere propaganda as is the case with newspapers, of course only for those of us who still read them, we find it difficult to figure whether it's news or PR & we find that it is PR more often than not. The rampant prevalence of paid news has constructed the Information paradigm of our times leading to a plethora of misinformation. As a very dear friend of mine, a Senior News Editor @ NDTV told me rather sadly over a drink the other day “this is not news we make anymore it's marketing”.

And if we look at the kind of dramatic narrative in fiction feature films that is capturing our imagination today then we find films like Raazi, Uri, Padmaavat, Manikarnika all of which are works of fiction based on true stories, espousing & perpetuating Nationalism, Anti – Terrorism, Might of the Indian Army, Patriotism, New India & the Us v/s Them narrative. Like I said stories come from around us, within us & are reflections of society which make them authentic, believable & credible.

5. How is drama constructed?

Dramatic Narrative is a narrative based on dramatic stories. All dramatic narratives are about a protagonist male / female / transgender / animal / machine / ghost etc. who has a journey & a goal that they have to reach. Every time the protagonist / character moves forward they are stopped by someone or something which doesn't want them to move forward & achieve their goal so the protagonist's thesis is conflicted by the antagonist's anti thesis (there can be many antagonists' human, environmental, spiritual, metaphysical, other worldly etc.) & this conflict creates a dialectic which in narrative terms is drama. The more the drama or the intensity of the dialectic the more the tension & anticipation in the audiences' mind, whether the protagonist shall overcome the various conflicts in the narrative & achieve / reach the goal he/she set out to accomplish. Therefore, the more the conflict is perpetuated more compassion is garnered for the protagonist & our engagement with the story. This very engagement is what successful storytelling thrives on & makes a narrative a success or a failure or in box office terms makes a film a hit or a flop. In Indian Cinema traditionally the men or the heroes have to be macho & morally correct, an embodiment of Maryada Puushottam (Lord Ram) himself. Even today all our stories are based on the Ramayana a classic embodiment of a dialectic wherein Ram who is whiter than the whitest, epitomizes morality & can do no wrong conflicts with Raavan who is blacker than the blackest, is immoral & stands for all that is wrong. We still believe in happy endings, still expect good to eventually vanquish evil, putting it simply we thrive on stereotypes, just as Ram vanquished Raavan but today's narratives are all in the grey zone and are not based on blacks & whites & that is because none of us are black or white but different shades of grey & as I have said before all stories are reflections of us & our lives. Today's Hero has become amoral, soft, sensitive & understanding, a metrosexual. He no longer necessarily needs to be a great achiever or be all white to start with, as long as he finds a purpose, as the narrative unfolds, which embodies certain heroic characteristics, however flawed, it's acceptable.

All dramatic conflicts grapple with morality & values since time immemorial the only difference now is that the lines between moral & immoral are heavily diffused & no protagonist can necessarily take a moral high ground against an antagonist who has now evolved into an anti - hero. Therefore, the writing of contemporary dramatic narrative necessitates hurting one's sensibilities, accepting the anti – thesis as an equal in the dynamic, relook at happy endings & create more plausible, believable & credible stories.

6. Changing dynamic of heroism

Traditionally in Indian Cinema women were treated as inferior, eve teasing and talking down to her was justified, she was always expected to be grateful, men were after all the leaders of patriarchal society and therefore all behavior which conflicted with or challenged her morality was justified. This conventional construct is now changing as the women are emerging heroic, mostly grey yet morally justified while the male hero though present takes a back seat and his morality becomes more and more suspect as patriarchy & chauvinism is questioned repeatedly.

We have perpetuated the mother image in the depiction of the women in our Cinema since time immemorial i.e, if she has to be accepted as a heroine she has to have all the makings of a morally upright strong character who is willing to sacrifice all for her love/ family etc. One who shall maintain her dignity & the family's honour at any cost and yet remain unappreciated and unacknowledged once she is wooed. This attitude although unacceptable as it is discriminatory unfortunately still reflects the status of a majority of women in our society. Which is why women today want to reclaim patriarchal spaces, all the women's movements across the country in recent times exemplify & reflect this: Haji Ali, Shani Shingnapur, Triple Talaq, #metoo, #timesup, Sabarimala etc.

Indian Cinema is not merely a means of entertainment, it is a way of life, almost a religion for Indians. Indian Cinema caters to a Global audience yet the contradictions remain, we are still a pluralistic society steeped in tradition. We have song and dance interwoven in our narrative and the western world looks upon us with indulgence, mockery and condescension. But little do they realize that song and dance is in our culture and tradition and we have incorporated it into Cinema & Bollywood is fast becoming more of a verb & less of a noun especially in the west.

Any narrative that fuels change is a good narrative & Bollywood is reflecting this new found empowerment in women and short fiction is taking the lead in the changing and evolving female character. Short Fiction Films like Chutney, Khujli & Juice to name a few are depictions of very strong female characters played by Tisca Chopra, Neena Gupta & Shefali Shah respectively, in everyday situations creating very effective dramatic narratives. The topics are varied like crime, domesticity & sexuality yet what is most interesting & impactful is the simplicity of the exposition of the protagonist / female character, her strength, her resilience and how she dominates the narrative despite the space being essentially patriarchal. She is the hero, anti – hero, the mother, the conscience keeper. She is unassuming, in control, feminine & graceful reminding the patriarchal world of what a moral compass is despite being in extremely twisted or complicated situations.

6.1 Below are the synopsis of the three films mentioned

Chutney a most unassuming tale of revenge that transpires through a seemingly casual chit-chat about domestic affairs that takes place over a plate of pakodas (served with green chutney) and two glasses of soft drink. But it must be noted that Jyoti Kapur Das' short film shares much in common with a short story by Roald Dahl—Lamb to the Slaughter, in which a pregnant woman kills her husband with a big bone of frozen lamb, and later, serves it to the investigating cops who are looking for the suspect weapon. The most fascinating—and repelling—thing about Chutney is the macabre connection between food and death, especially when that death is caused by murder. And murder is the last thing we think of when we meet Anita, a demure housewife at a party in an elite club in a “model town” somewhere in the outskirts of Delhi, near Uttar Pradesh.

Juice: There is nothing like a household kitchen to demonstrate a culture's deeply ingrained patriarchal setup. Neeraj Ghaywan (*Masaan*) cleverly chooses one such “get-together” of married couples in his acutely observed new short, *Juice*. He recognizes, first and foremost, that the concept of marriage these days – especially amidst old friends we've grown up with in smaller cities – is the license to reinforce domestic clichés. Suddenly, everybody becomes their parents and uncles and aunties from a bygone era. Suddenly a partition is drawn, not unlike concentration camps, where girls are put in a dark chamber while men bond through labour. She is the leader and host, the orchestrator of refreshments to the hardworking men who provide for them. All the fathers, with their whisky and cigarettes, are gleefully dissecting the inevitability of Hillary Clinton losing to Donald Trump. They are cackling on about the usefulness of a new female employee. They are announcing their personalities instead of embracing them. The characters around her sway between irritating and ignorant, the sounds and smells of delicious food add to the assault on her senses, the heat is stifling, while the “intimateness” of the city flat makes it seem like the walls are closing in. *Juice* is a terrific short film without being too understated. It hits close to many homes that don't even recognize that a *Juice* is unraveling amidst them even as they read this. The film might seem like it ends on a high – through a victorious gesture of not feminism but humanism. But it really is an everyday tragedy.

Khujli: In a room, a bed is shaking rhythmically and sounds of a man moaning as it is revealed that it was due to Roopmati (Neena Gupta) scratching Girdharilal's (Jackie Shroff) back with a churning stick to ease an itch. Their son knocks on the door and asks them to be quiet. He further informs them that he will be out late. Girdharilal replies humorously that instead of telling so he could have texted them. In the kitchen, Roopmati ignites the gas stove as her aged grandmother is walking towards the washroom behind her. The twist in the plot comes when Jackie finds a pair of pink handcuffs in his young son's bedroom. Scandalised and angry, he shows his find to his wife. His tirade however, is interrupted when Neena smiles slyly and tells him she knows the handcuffs are used for BDSM, because she had read *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Short Fiction as the name suggests are films of short duration which are not beyond half an hour in length. Although the 3 Essentials of a dramatic Story: Premise, Conflict & Resolution remain some of the other fundamentals are modified as per the requirement of the medium. One can't take too much time in establishing the characters or the setting therefore we need to pick up the scene in the middle of the action, enter a scene late & leave early to build up anticipation to heighten the drama. A sense of presumed / perceived danger to the protagonist has to be created to generate interest & evoke empathy & compassion as this leads to building up an intrigue / suspense element which always engages & hooks an audience. The plot needs to be unraveled whatever maybe the genre by peeling it layer by layer just as we do in Thriller & Horror narratives, the plot is more often than not – “Extra-ordinary things happen to ordinary people”. There has to be a turning point, an unexpected twist in the tale as it surprises the audience & catches them unawares.

When Shefali Shah in the climax of *Juice* enters the living room, settles down in front of a fan, sipping her glass of juice she exemplifies appropriate application of motivation of the protagonist. She is defiant & assertive & one look at her husband nearly emasculates him, despite him & all the other men in the room staring back at her in shock & anger. They are embarrassed, humiliated & want to burst out “how dare you?” but remain quiet & a new idiom of heroism is born. *Chutney* essentially is all about a Back Story as Tisca Chopra, the protagonist, narrates the tale of Bhola & how he died in the process constructing for us an engaging narrative which cuts back & forth in time while establishing the character's History but the real beauty of the film lies in the unexpected end, the twist in the tale, which slaps the audience in the face because despite knowing the past & present of the characters we are caught completely unawares & are left in complete awe of the narrative. *Khujli* successfully echoes the fundamental of a Short Fiction narrative's plot “Extra-ordinary things happen to ordinary people”. Wherein we see a middle aged woman embracing her sexuality with confidence & rekindling desire in her near reluctant, morally aghast husband by teaching him all about Kinkiness & BDSM. This is yet another dimension of feminine heroism unafraid, willing to take the lead in the bedroom & not in denial about her needs.

All these elements lend to good storytelling which can entertain, educate, influence & give us food for thought. Free our minds from the shackles of unnecessary hurdles & self - inflicted blocks. Which plant seeds of ideas & further lead to change by making us question archaic & pre - determined constructs & usher in a new moral paradigm. Stories like the kind our Grandmothers inculcated in us which were a mix of mythology, history & fantasy yet steeped in reality. Stories from Aesop's fables & Panchatantra which enabled us to think for ourselves, gave us an understanding of right & wrong, entertained us while subliminally laying the foundation for a knowledge base which equipped us to deal with the rest of our lives.

If we examine mainstream market driven entertainment based stories we find a plethora of recreations, remakes & remixes. Bollywood is a front runner in perpetuating this malaise where we are consuming without thinking & simply numbing & deadening our minds. This is reflective of our mechanical lives which leave little or no scope for creative thinking & new thought which shall bring back a sense of wonderment & excitement in to our lives.

7. Conclusion

What does the Future of storytelling hold in store for us?

As I said before the future will be determined by the way we consume our stories. We live in a market driven industry which is going completely digital & we are hooked to our smart phones wherein everything is an App: WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat etc. have replaced letters, telegrams, newspapers, magazines, Television, Radio & even Cinema. Appointment viewing is on its way out & it is only a matter of time before all stories whether information, education or entertainment based shall be consumed digitally as Internet penetration & connectivity increases so will our consumption patterns. Already the number of views are determining the monetization of video content on platforms such as YouTube which is changing the way marketing & sales are done. Social Media platforms such as twitter & Instagram have become the arenas of debate & the arbiters of popular trends. The buzz words of consumption today are hashtags & Viral videos which are constantly vying for our attention and are giving TRPs & Box Office revenues a run for their money. Most of the Oscar nominated films this year were consumed online & not in Cinema halls as per tradition which gives us a clear indication of what lies ahead. With these changing patterns of consumption it will become increasingly difficult to hold audiences' attention and guarantee eyeballs on any single medium of communication. Some of the changes in the content which I see happening will be stories with heightened drama & shorter duration along with realistic depictions of society which will be of longer duration, these will create a viable monetisable market for alternative content like documentaries, experimental films, animation, short fiction etc. Stories with simplistic immediate solutions which offer no permanent solution will become popular. The lines between mainstream content & sexually explicit content shall blur. Porn, subversive propaganda, gaming & virtual reality shall become mainstream. Web series will go interactive & apps which will allow the consumer to create their own stories will become popular. Stories shall be customized & personalized for niche consumption which shall usher in a new morality. The chaos of excessive & random consumption shall lead to order & the over dependence on technology shall lead to new creative thought & stories of wonderment. Entropy shall ensure this evolution but it will take at least three more generations before this change may happen. Therefore it is imperative for storytellers today to reflect before engaging with the audience who themselves are storytellers to determine a robust, mature & inclusive future & not allow it to drown in a cauldron of rampant commercialization & deviance.

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