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POWER, INDEPENDENCE, AND CULTURAL CONFLICT: A SEMIOTIC STUDY OF SANJAY LEELA BHANSALI'S BAJIRAO MASTANI

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ABSTRACT

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film *Bajirao Mastani* (2015) uses a historical narrative to convey a modern tale. This study delves into the depiction of Muslim rulers, particularly Mastani, in the Bollywood period drama *Bajirao Mastani*. Originating in the 1930s, Bollywood has grown into a massive film industry, primarily producing Hindi-language films with a worldwide audience. The industry offers a diverse range of genres, including romantic dramas, action thrillers, comedic musicals, and historical epics. Bollywood has indeed depicted medieval times; this paper focuses on *Bajirao Mastani* for an in-depth analysis of its narrative. The film centers on the Maratha Peshwa, Bajirao, and his relationship with his second wife, the daughter of Rajput King Chhatrasal and Ruhani Bai. This research underscores the importance of a more nuanced comprehension of India's rich cultural heritage and its ongoing portrayal in popular culture. It will investigate the representation of Muslims in these two films and, through comparative analysis, explore how current issues shape our depiction of historical events.

Keywords: historical background, depiction of power, techniques employed, relationship, pre-existing, viewpoints, qualitative analysis.

Introduction

Menon, N. (2016) offers an analysis of "*Bajirao Mastani*" as a lavish period drama that encapsulates numerous elements characteristic of Indian popular cinema. The film is distinctly a "cinema of excess" and is "loosely structured in the style of cinema of attractions," a hallmark of Indian popular cinema as identified by film scholar Ravi Vasudevan. While the film pays homage to classic Indian period films, particularly *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), director Sanjay Leela Bhansali's work is also progressive, incorporating advanced special effects and feminist themes. The film prioritizes spectacle over narrative, embracing a "cinema of attractions" (Thapa, A., 2016). Adapted from the Marathi novel *Raau* by Nagnath S. Inamdar, the film centers on the repercussions of an interfaith relationship between the Maratha Peshwa Bajirao Ballad (portrayed



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by Ranveer Singh), a Hindu, and his Rajput-Muslim wife, Mastani (portrayed by Deepika Padukone) (Cain, R., 2015). Upon his appointment as the commander-in-chief of the 18th-century Maratha empire, Bajirao departs, leaving his wife Kashibai (portrayed by Priyanka Chopra) to fortify allied forces in Sikaunji (Chattopadhyay, N., 2016). His journey is momentarily interrupted when warrior princess Mastani seeks his assistance to liberate the besieged Bundelkhand region. Following their victory, they retreat to her palace, where their romantic relationship begins to develop (Karthika, 2015). Before departing, Bajirao presents Mastani with his dagger as a token of gratitude for saving his life on the battlefield. However, Bajirao is unaware that in Bundelkhand, gifting a dagger signifies marriage (Gaikwad, P., 2011). Mastani subsequently arrives at his palace, asserting her rightful place as his wife, which ignites tensions as Bajirao becomes embroiled in conflicts with his assertive mother, his brother, and the palace's Hindu priests (Iqbal, S., & Iqbal, S., 2024). According to Bhansali, "Bajirao Mastani" is based on the 1972 novel *Rau* by N. S. Inamdar, rather than the historical figure of the Marathi Peshwa Baji Rao I (Shandilya, K., 2024). This study will concentrate on the historical background and additional stories about Peshwa Baji Rao I and Maratha history due to the novel's difficulty in being reviewed. (Karkhanis, M. D., 1965). Prachi Deshpande, in her analysis of Marathi historical fiction during the Indian colonial period of the 1930s, asserts that "besides serving as a vehicle for anticolonial nationalism and Marathi regional identity," Marathi historical fiction—through novels, plays, and eventually cinema—"served as an important site for ongoing social and cultural negotiations over tradition and modernity."

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the depiction of power dynamics, cultural conflict, and female independence in *Bajirao Mastani*, directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali
2. To examine the semiotic elements and cinematic techniques employed in *Bajirao Mastani* to convey themes of power and cultural clashes.

Methodology

In this paper, descriptive qualitative analysis is the research method employed, in which each visual that appears in the films is separated apart, and its meanings and songs are examined. Semiotic theory and all of its viewpoints, including color, themes of power, independence, and cultural conflict, will also be covered in this study. This study used several resources, including prior studies, newspaper and film reviews, and assistance from online and library resources. The term "semiotic" was first used by John Locke in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in conjunction with Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic research and the assistance of pre-existing research papers and theses on the idea. The main sources of information for this study are a few chosen films. *Bajirao Mastani* (2015) Although secondary data is derived from literary reviews in cinema reviews, books, journals, and articles are accessible both electronically and physically. Purposive



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sampling is the sample approach used in this study. The documentation of semiotics in scenes that portray women through screen capture will be the method used for data collecting in this study. The research's sample consists of scenes that depict women and have feminism-related components. Prior to the data analysis, every movie was viewed from start to finish in order to choose which scene or sample will be used in the study.

Review of literature

Pushpa Gaikwad (2011) Bajirao Mastani: A Protagonist as seen Through the Folklore Traditions. This research paper explores the life and legacy of Mastani, the wife of Bajirao I, highlighting the biases and misconceptions surrounding her character. Despite being a princess in the Maratha royal family, Mastani faced prejudice from the Peshwa court and Brahmin communities that undermined her status and contributions.

The paper emphasizes the necessity for feminist historiography to reinterpret her narrative, advocating for a more profound comprehension of her historical role. It ultimately concludes that Mastani's life and influence merit recognition, as she played a significant role in shaping the socio-cultural landscape of her era and challenged patriarchal norms.

Nilanjan Chattopadhyay (2016) Past as a Period: Historicizing 'love' in Bollywood Period Films (Bajirao Mastani). In "Past as a Period: Historicizing 'love' in Bollywood Period Films," Nilanjan Chatterjee examines the depiction of love in Bollywood's period films, with a focus on cultural and historical interpretations. The author critiques Western perspectives on Indian concepts of love, particularly the distinctions between Shringara and Ishq, while analyzing inter-religious conflicts portrayed in these films. Chatterjee contends that period films frequently reflect nationalist themes, where love is intertwined with identity and power dynamics. The study underscores the politics of historical representation and audience reception, suggesting that directors' interpretations shape historical narratives in cinema. Ultimately, it seeks to unravel the complexities of love in Bollywood films within socio-political contexts.

Karthika (2015) article, Feminism in India, Bajirao Mastani Review: A Look At All The Women. Bajirao Mastani impressed viewers with its grand settings, jewels, visuals, and costumes. The film's style mixes elements from Devdas, Mughal-E-Azam, and Goliyon ki raasleela Ram-Leela. The big change in this film is its visual effects and presentation. The movie shows Bajirao's love for both his wives. Bajirao respected both wives, even though Mastani was seen as a concubine by the Brahmin community. He treated his children equally. He saw Kashibai as his inspiration and strength, even though he loved Mastani deeply. He rushed to Mastani when she was in labor because no doctor would help her. It was nice to see this caring side of Bajirao, along with his fierce side when he shouted "Har har Mahadev" before fighting many soldiers with amazing stunts. Themes of power, independence, and cultural conflict.



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Analysis

In medieval times, it was common for kings to have multiple wives, often marrying younger women as their older wives aged or became pregnant. These marriages were rarely based on love and were more about political alliances or lineage. However, Bollywood has reimagined historical figures like Bajirao and Akbar, portraying them as deeply affectionate and devoted lovers rather than just powerful rulers.

Bajirao, for instance, is depicted as loving both Mastani and Kashibai in different yet equally profound ways—one as his strength, the other as his inspiration. His honesty and feeling of duty are demonstrated by his wish to publicly recognize Mastani as his wife only after confessing to Kashibai. In order to give Mastani the respect and standing of a wife, he also wanted to marry her according to the correct Hindu rites. The idea of her being called a mere "concubine" deeply offended him. His powerful declaration, "Maine Mastani se ishq kiya hai, aiyashi nahi" ("I have loved Mastani, not used her for pleasure"), underscores his unwavering commitment. For Bajirao, love was far more valuable than his kingdom, power, or wealth, and he was willing to sacrifice everything to be with Mastani.

Although this portrayal is idealized, it offers a refreshing perspective on Bajirao as a man who treated the women in his life with respect and as equals. He is not shown as a typical hero reinforcing patriarchal norms, but rather as a compassionate partner who valued love, friendship, and individuality.

Despite its criticisms, the film features a notably progressive scene. When Mastani goes into labor, no midwife or doctor is willing to assist her. In a bold move, Bajirao steps in himself to help deliver their child. This challenges the traditional norm of women giving birth in isolation at their parental homes, only to return with the newborn—ideally a male heir.

However, while the scene had the potential to be a powerful emotional climax, it falls short. The childbirth process is merely glossed over, lacking the depth and intensity it deserves. The film's emphasis on grandeur before and after the birth diminishes what could have been a truly significant and moving moment.

Set in the 18th century, Bajirao Mastani follows the journey of Bajirao, a fierce warrior who rises to become the Peshwa, the chief military and political leader of the Maratha Empire. As Peshwa, he leads numerous successful campaigns, expanding the empire's influence. Mastani, the Muslim daughter of a Hindu Rajput monarch, participated in one such campaign. seeks his help to defend her kingdom. Impressed by her exceptional sword-fighting skills,

Bajirao agrees and presents her with a dagger—unaware that, in her culture, this gesture symbolizes marriage.

Mastani journeys to Pune to join Bajirao, yet his mother, disapproving of her religious background, confines her to the courtesan quarters and conceals her arrival. He warns her that society will never



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accept their relationship when he and Bajirao are reunited, especially since he is already married to Kashi, whom he loves. Mastani, however, is unwavering in her resolve to face the difficulties that lie ahead. The story develops into a moving examination of sacrifice, love, and social norms. These star-crossed lovers' linear storyline provides a blank canvas for Bhansali's unique filmmaking approach. The film's cinematography, which is primarily filmed in long and medium-long takes, beautifully conveys the majesty of its painstakingly constructed settings. Every frame captivates the viewer's eye and beckons them to fully appreciate its splendor. This architectural wonder is best exemplified by the Aaina Mahal (Palace of Mirrors), which honors the famous Sheesh Mahal from Mughal-E-Azam (1960). These extravagant set designs, which bring Bhansali's vision to life with amazing detail, are typical of high-budget Bollywood films.



Mirrors Palace in Mugl-e-Aazam

The British Empire, which ruled India for almost 200 years, was the main target of anticolonial nationalism in that country. However, there were barriers to openly expressing anti-colonial feelings for Indian writers, especially Marathi writers. They often used historical accounts of previous foreign rulers—the Muslim invaders—as a means of venting their resentment of British rule. Their literary works were influenced by this mood, which merged with the emerging anti-British groups. The Battle of Panipat, the last stand of Sadashivrao Bhau, the nephew of Bajirao I, whose defeat nonetheless crippled the Muslim invaders, and Shivaji's founding of the Maratha Empire after the fall of Mughal control were among the topics frequently covered by Marathi writers. Bajirao and Mastani's romance was another recurrent theme. The Maratha warrior is portrayed as the metaphorical savior of the nation, saving it from the so-called "rapacious" Muslim attacker. These stories were written to appeal to young male readers and reflect current political trends. Bhansali's Bajirao Mastani deviates in a number of ways from both historical accounts and conventional storytelling. While the classic Bajirao Mastani romance centers on their love story, the film shifts its focus. Instead of prioritizing their relationship, it emphasizes Bajirao's military

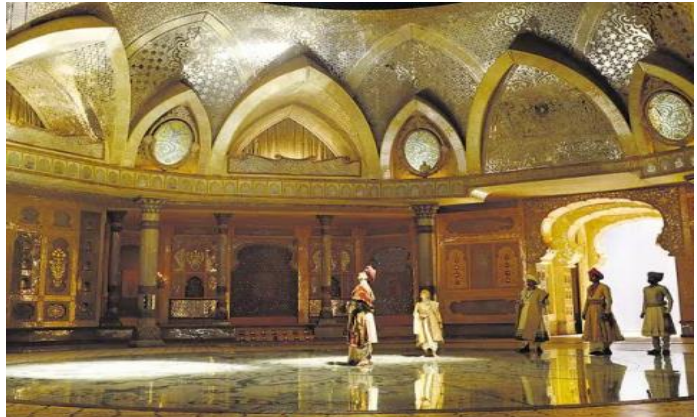


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triumphs, Mastani's struggles against the Bhau family, and the growing rift between Bajirao and his first wife, Kashi.

Bajirao's military skills are shown differently in the film. He was a strong leader known for his smart strategies and expanding Maratha power in India. The movie makes these traits bigger and more dramatic. It shows Bajirao easily beating the Nizam and making him surrender completely. But history tells a more detailed story. Historian Stewart Gordon says Bajirao and the Nizam *The Architecture of Mirrors Palace*

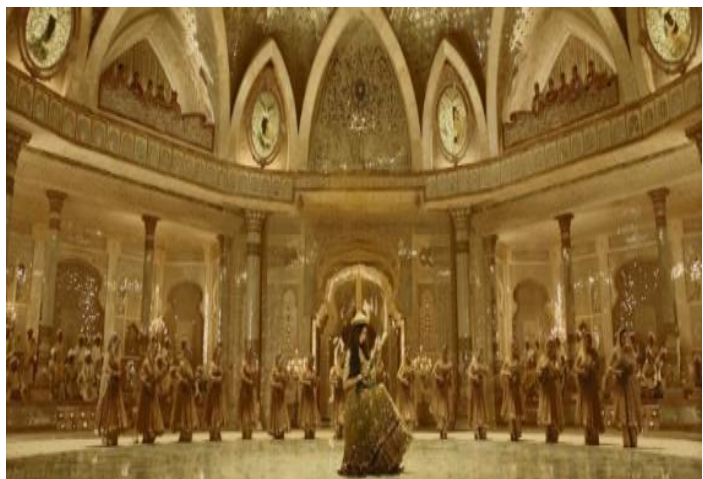


first worked together in a short campaign with a careful friendship. They only fought seriously two years later. The dances by Mastani in Bajirao Mastani add drama. Umar points out the gentle sensuality of Deewani Mastani, saying it mainly attracts a Hindu audience and makes Muslim viewers briefly relate to Hindu characters, who stand for Indian nationalism.

Umar further contrasts Mastani with Kashi, comparing Kashi as a symbol of the nation, which "cannot perform sexual gestures like Mastani." The song's visual elements reinforce this idea. The set is lavishly decorated with gold and mirrors, creating a muted, uniform aesthetic where individual colors blend together. The only distinct colors belong to Bajirao's dark green vest and Kashi's purple shawl. Umar describes this "chromophobia"—also evident in Khalibali—as a technique to manipulate and fetishize Mastani. The mirrored set amplifies this effect, multiplying her image and turning her into an object on display. Her small, collar-like necklace further reinforces the notion of possession, subtly suggesting that she is owned or controlled.

The Mirror Palace

Mastani's dances in Bajirao Mastani follow a consistent aesthetic pattern, Much like Deewani Mastani. This strategy is once again seen in Mohe Rang Do Laal. The visuals adopt a muted palette of creams and sage greens, an unusual choice for a Holi celebration. The song's title, meaning "paint me in the color of red," starkly contrasts with the subdued setting.





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Holi, a festival renowned for its vibrant display of colors, is scarcely depicted. The only remnants of it are visible on Mastani's hands and red lips, which resemble dried blood rather than the festival's bright hues. The scene's focus remains on Mastani's body, capturing Bajirao's attention and tempting him to adorn her with the red still absent from her skin. This portrays Mastani as a visual show for Bajirao, who is already enthralled with her fighting skills but now finds her attractiveness admirable. This idea is further supported by her father's perceptive background observation of Bajirao's response, as he seems happy that Bajirao finds her admirable. The lyrics of "Mohe Rang Do Laal" draw from the narrative of Radha and Krishna, casting Mastani as Radha—deeply devoted yet playfully taunted by Krishna—mirroring her longing for Bajirao's love and acceptance. In contrast, "Albela Sajan" diverges from the themes of commodification and fetishization evident in Mastani's performances. Here, Kashi takes center stage, surrounded by women who are similarly radiant in rich hues and decked up in vivid colors. Kashi announces Bajirao's presence, blowing a ceremonial horn at the start of the song, performing traditional duties in his honor. She even flies the Maratha Empire's saffron flag, proving Umar's assertion that Kashi is a perfect and unadulterated representation of the nations. The women in "Albela Sajan" have distinctive clothing, eschewing the visual homogenization observed elsewhere, in contrast to Mastani's scenes, where uniformity rules. Kashi herself symbolizes Bajirao's victory by donning a vivid yellow sari., underscoring her position as the unwavering, dignified embodiment of honor and tradition.



Rangoli scene

With her signature purple shawl draped over it, Kashi's attire stands out. This demonstrates that Bhansali is capable of directing a song that avoids the commodification aesthetic, implying that his choice to present Mastani in such a light was a deliberate and intentional decision.



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Cultural ceremony

in the first scene following Bajirao Mastani's opening titles, Kashi speaks with her friend Bhanu, who is grieving over the death of her husband. Bhanu holds Bajirao accountable for her husband's passing and predicts that Kashi will experience the same suffering in the future. This suggests Bhanu has cursed Kashi, connecting her fate to Mastani's. The scene makes us wonder if this is a story that gives power to women or warns about the risks of women taking control. Bhansali, the director, hints that women have a lot of power over their lives and others, maybe even more than men. This could mean that men are not blamed for their actions, and women are seen as the ones who control fate.

Similar to Mehrunisa, Mastani allows events to unfold around her, making only two significant decisions: first, when she seeks Bajirao's help, and second, when she decides to go to Pune with him. In contrast to Mehrunisa, who ultimately decides her own destiny, Mastani's choices merely set her narrative in motion. While she, like Mehrunisa, endures the injustices she faces out of love for Bajirao, In contrast to Mehrunisa or even Kashi, she never regains control over her life. Even *Mehrunisa and Kashibai*

when she was given the chance to fight for her freedom in the end, Mastani submits to imprisonment by Nana Saheb, deciding against battling for the opportunity to engage in activities with her son. Kashi exhibits a greater degree of agency over her life compared to Mastani and exerts influence over





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Bajirao's life as well. Kashi acknowledges that Bajirao's happiness is intertwined with Mastani, despite his continued commitment to her. This dynamic is particularly evident during the Ganesh puja scene. A pundit cautions Kashi that Mastani's life is in jeopardy during the prayers and implores her to intervene. The pundit appears to have attempted to avert this outcome himself but perceives no alternative. The scene unfolds against the backdrop of an elaborate Hindu ceremony. The accompanying song reflects Kashi's internal struggle, Bajirao's supplications, and Mastani's struggle for survival alongside her son. Over time, Mastani endures mistreatment from Bajirao's family, including his mother, brother, and Kashi. The relationship between Bajirao and Kashi deteriorates, yet Kashi continues to harbor affection for him. Following an attempt on In Mastani's life, Bajirao builds her a separate home.

Bajirao is soon called away for yet another military operation. Without his son Nana Saheb and his mother, Mastani. Bajirao learns of this betrayal but is gravely injured in battle. The film concludes with Bajirao dying from his wounds on the battlefield, while Mastani passes away in prison at the same time.



The death scene of Mastani and Bajirao

Religiously important Ganesh Baba statues are prominently featured throughout the song, accompanied by chanting and rituals. Kashi decides to inform. Standing in front of one of these monuments, Bajirao discussed the murderous scheme as if facing the divine helps clarify her decision. The editing of the scenes implies that Mastani draws strength from Ganesh Baba, with the fiery intensity of her struggle paralleling the ceremonial fire used in the religious rituals.



Worship of lord Ganesh



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Kashi could have regained her life and her husband if she had disregarded the pundit's warning, but Bajirao would have been devastated. By informing him, she places his happiness above her own, ultimately altering the fates of all three characters. By letting a delirious Bajirao mistake her for Mastani at the end of the movie, Kashi makes a similar sacrifice, realizing that Mastani's presence provides him more solace than hers does.

Findings

The film utilizes visual and narrative elements to depict power struggles, particularly in the relationships among Bajirao, Mastani, and Kashi, reflecting both personal and sociopolitical hierarchies.

Mastani stands as a symbol of female empowerment, challenging traditional gender roles and asserting her independence through her actions and decisions, which are visually highlighted by her costume and dialogue delivery.

Bhansali frames this tension through repeated references to ritual purity and caste orthodoxy. Mastani is denied access to temple rituals, excluded from palace festivities, and even subjected to assassination attempts by Bajirao's own kin. These acts are not driven solely by personal animosity but by a collective anxiety about preserving religious and cultural purity. In this context, Mastani becomes a symbol of "the other"—not because of her behavior, but because of her origins.

Bajirao's own transformation over the course of the film reflects the cost of challenging these boundaries. Initially celebrated for his military achievements and religious commitment, he finds his social capital eroded as he publicly supports Mastani. His position as Peshwa becomes tenuous not due to political failures, but because his personal choices are perceived as religious betrayals. Bhansali uses this arc to critique how power in Indian history has often been conditional—granted to those who conform, and revoked from those who dissent.

Visually, this conflict is reinforced through spatial segregation and color symbolism. Mastani is placed in dimly lit spaces, often behind veils or bars, reinforcing her status as an outsider. Temple spaces, on the other hand, are brightly lit and filled with saffron hues—representing purity and belonging. Yet, Bhansali subtly complicates this visual hierarchy. In several scenes, Mastani's calm demeanor and luminous presence contrast with the rigidity and aggression of the Brahmins, flipping the traditional script of insider vs. outsider.

Conclusion

Bajirao Mastani is far more than a historical romance—it is a richly textured cinematic meditation on power, identity, religion, and resistance. Through Bhansali's signature aesthetics, complex character arcs, and emotionally resonant storytelling, the film challenges traditional notions of history and pushes viewers to rethink cultural absolutes. In dissecting this film through multiple lenses—narrative structure, semiotics, gender dynamics, religious tensions, and auteur vision—we uncover how historical fiction can become a tool of contemporary critique.



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At its heart, *Bajirao Mastani* is a love story, but one that resists simplification. *Bajirao*, *Mastani*, and *Kashibai* are not merely caught in a romantic triangle; they are symbolic of larger ideological struggles. *Mastani*'s hybridity, *Kashibai*'s restrained strength, and *Bajirao*'s emotional descent all signal the costs of resisting or conforming to societal expectations. Their lives are shaped—and ultimately shattered—by forces greater than themselves: orthodoxy, patriarchy, and the politics of religion. Ultimately, *Bajirao Mastani* transcends its historical setting to offer insights into the timeless struggles of power and identity, making it a significant case study for exploring how cinema can reflect and challenge societal norms. The findings underscore the film's role in highlighting the intersections of gender, culture, and power, offering a valuable contribution to the discourse on Indian historical cinema. As Indian cinema continues to evolve in its global reach and narrative scope, films like *Bajirao Mastani* stand as reminders that aesthetics and ideology can coexist. The film doesn't offer easy answers. It offers instead a mirror—one in which we see the fractures of society, the fragility of power, and the quiet, enduring force of love.

Bajirao Mastani is a landmark in contemporary Indian filmmaking. It fuses art with advocacy, romance with resistance, and history with hope. By centering the marginalized, complicating the powerful, and dignifying the emotional, Bhansali's vision leaves an enduring legacy—one that invites continuous engagement, critique, and admiration.

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