

Film Appreciation
Prof. Aysha Iqbal
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture – 14

Good morning. So, we are going to talk about melodrama in cinema and I would also like you to refer to one of the lectures that is a part of this course, in the great Hindi film Deewar, and apply the features of melodrama in cinema. See, why are you doing this course; you will understand that whether, I discuss Hindi film or Hollywood film or foreign film, if you know the theory well and that concepts well, you can apply all the aspects of that concept and that theory to any cinema from any part of the world.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:02)



So, while talking melodrama the key words here are high drama, excessive emotions, interplay of and the dynamics of class and sex. The term melodrama, as you know is used very pejoratively. We often say don't watch this film it is highly melodramatic. Then also, the fact has to be taken account that melodrama happens to be a very successful genre; if not a genre, style of film making. We call a film melodramatic when it has excessive sentiment over the top emotions, over the top larger than life characters, and it intends to squeeze emotions out of us. One example is the traditional soap opera, where the emotions are always over the top. The term melodrama has its roots and origins in the Greek word, Melos, which is used for song, to suggest a song and in the early 19th century, many plays were produced with a musical accompaniment that

heighten the emotional aspect of the various scenes; for example, Sweeney Todd The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, which was made in 1979 for stage, but has also been recently made as a film, directed by Tim Burton.

Melodrama is not a recent concept in literature. Think of a play such as Oedipus Sophocles Oedipus which came into existence in 429 BC. In the play such as Oedipus where the hero inadvertently, kills his father and ends up marrying his mother, but when he realizes the truth, his wife or mother hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself. That is his way of self-punishment and lives in a state of self-exile. So, that was melodrama at its peaks. So, melodrama has always been in existence. The idea is to produce excessive emotions. You are also familiar with the Rule of Songs and Background in Course play and what an important role, these elements play in increasing the sentimental aspect of a scene in Indian cinema.

Best, consider that what MH. Ibrahim says; the term melodrama in melodramatic are like you know, they can extend to any work and we have also, seen that how most of these melodramatic works, whether in drama or prose fiction or even in cinema, they rely on impossible events and sensational acts. Melodrama in the sense as you know, in earlier Hollywood cinema, was a standard fair in good versus evil kind of plot. DW. Griffith's Grateful Birth of a Nation is an example of this kind of film. So, good versus evil is a standard fair of melodrama. Now, these days we now that we use the word melodramatic to dismiss a film as worthless; however, this belies the fact that the melodrama as a film genre, is as worthy as any other and as an aesthetic. It has a countless elements to it. You have movies, ranging from or raging between westerns and ethics and comedy, and in all melodramatic contents or aspects can be found in any of these genres. Drawing on influences as wide ranging as Greek tragedy and sentimental Victorian novels, melodrama was a hugely popular theatrical form in the late 19th century, like slapstick comedy, which had its roots in vaudeville it adapted easily to the silent films as well.

Melodrama placed a heavy emphasis on expressive gestures and visual iconography than on dialog and naturalism; for example, Birth of a Nation that was made by DW. Griffith and melodrama often had tragic outcomes. In Hindi films, you can think instantly, of film such as Mother India, Deewar, that is part of this course and also, think of film like Muqaddar ka Sikandar starring Amitabh Bachchan, which is one of the most popular entertaining, but highly melodramatic film. So, stories are good versus evils were told, using familiar motives and archetypes, and creating over the top emotions in melodrama.

The themes of drama, which is the oldest stage form, an art form, were exaggerated within melodramas, and the liberal use of music often enhanced their emotional plots.

You think of songs and background discourse and how they in a serve to enhance the melodramatically excessive emotional content or quotient of the film. Often film studies refer pejoratively, to the genre of melodrama, calling them unrealistic. ...of romance or domestic situations with stereotypical characters. The often include a central female characters, and I am not talking about the women's pictures, that would directly appeal to feminine audiences. The sub genre like this is typically looked down upon by critics and especially, the more elitist kinds of audiences. From our own examples in recent times, we can think of a blockbuster, star studded film by Karan Johar; that is [FL], *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* which was made in 2002, where you feel all the leading characters are good hearted and pure characters, but they are victims of circumstances. Then it is a tearjerker; At the end, it ends happily, but then every emotion, which is squeezed out of view through the running length of the film.

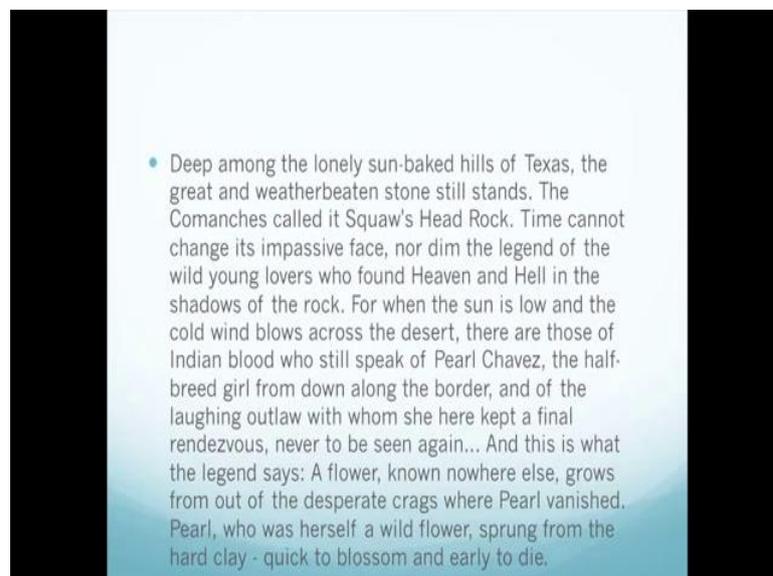
Again, in Sooraj Barjatya's romantic melodrama *Maine Pyar Kiya*, which was a 1989 film, we find again, pure characters versus stock evil characters. It was a huge blockbuster, starring Salman Khan and young Bhagyashree, and the song and dance situation help to enhance the entertainment, entertainment as well as melodramatic content or quotient of the film. Again, some of the greatest films of the 80s are made by Subhash Ghai; for example, *Hero*, *Karma* and also, *Ram Lakhan* and *Trimurti*, as well as *Pardes*, which was made as late as in 1997. All these films are phenomenal success great entertainers, but extremely, melodramatic and you have, you know, extremely larger than lives characters here, with stock good and evil, versus evil characters; very sentimental, but very popular and of course, all great musicals as well. We have to remember that evil characters have no redeeming features on these types or these categories of melodramatic film. You have to also consider cinema of Rakesh Roshan who has given us films such as *Khooon Bhari Maang* and *Koyla*, *Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai* and how melodramatic they are, although, extremely popular and hugely successful.

One of the greatest examples of melodramatic films from Hollywood is *Duel in the Sun*, which is directed by King Vidor in 1946, and interestingly, it was branded lust in the dust at the time of its release. This film, which stars Gregory Peck and Jennifer Jones and also, Joseph Cotten, is a classic epic western produced by David O Selznick, who was you know, he failed in his desire to make it, the western equivalent of his earlier civil

war Epic Gone with the Winds. So, this film was produced by the great David O Selznick; however, the film was not so successful in spite of having every formula; perhaps, it was thought or that it was believed to be too lusty for those times. It is an overwrote script, based on 1944 novel by Niven Busch and it is about sexually charged; how breed women played by Jenifer Jones, who becomes the point of contention between two brothers; one a lusty brother, played by Gregory Peck and other, the good brother, played by Joseph Cotton.

Again this is a reworking of the cane and evil opposites; one brutish and one refined. The film is set in Texas in the 1880s, which is like you know, again, sort of western. We will find lost of horses and terrains and open terrains and taxing landscape; beautifully shot, very lavishly mounted film and quite a melodrama. Interestingly, it also opens with a prologue, which is spoken by Orson Welles and there is a fading on a mountain in the shape of face, which is a hard rock; that is base in the bloody red color of the settings. So, what we are saying is that mise en scene saw tells is the kind of index of film sets going to be the excessive emotion that you are going to find in this film. I would like you to draw your attention to the opening prologue from the film; Deep among the lonely sun baked hills of Texas.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:14)



This is the prologue which was spoken by Orson Welles. The great and whether beaten stone still stands. The Comanches called it Squaw's Head Rock. Time cannot change its impassive face, nor dim the legend of the wild young lovers, who found heaven and hell in the shadows of the rock. For when the sun is low and the cold wind blows across the

desert. There are those of Indian blood, who still speak of Pearl Chavez, the half-breed girl from down along the border and of the laughing outlaw with whom, she here kept a final rendezvous, never to be seen again. This is what the legend says: A flower, known nowhere else, grows from out of the desperate crags, where pearl vanished. Pearl, who was herself, a wild flower. It sprung from the hard clay, quick to blossom and early to die. So, this is the way, the film opens and the stage is set that you are going to find, you are going to see a tragic tale of love, or a doom love story. The melodrama achieve the particular status with you know, the film academicians with film academicians, showing interest in the works of DW. Griffith, Lawn Shennoy, John Stall, Nicholas Ray, Wilson Manely, Otto Preminger....according to film critic and expert Christine Gladhill the study of melodrama as a cinematic genre, is a recent development. It achieved public visibility in 1977, when the society of education in film and television commission papers for a study weekend.

Melodramatic plots with hard tagging literally tear jerking emotional plots, requiring multiple, you know, we are talking about those kinds of films; a woman go and just cry there eyes out. So, these films required multiple hanky pictures.... usually, emphasis and seasonal situation or crisis of human emotions. Again, consider Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham or The Dual in the Sun; these are feel romances, stories of feel romances, friendship, strange familiar situations, tragedy, illnesses, deaths, neurosis emotional and physical hardships within everyday life. You can also consider a film such as Terms of Endearment and also Mommie Dearest, which was based on Faye Dunaway's daughter, writing about; it is her own story actually, based on autobiography written by Joan Crawford's daughter, who was apparently mistreated by the great star of the classic golden age period. This movie, Mommie Dearest is based on that autobiography, with Faye Dunaway playing Joan Crawford and it is also considered one of the most melodramatic films ever made. So, what kinds of character we find in our melodrama; victims, couples, evil hearted laggards, pure and good heroes and heroines, pure and chaste heroines, virtuous heroic characters.

This offers in melodramas, and are presented with tremendous social pressures, threats, fears in probable events, difficulties with friends, communities, lovers or family. So, the melodramatic format allows the characters to work through the difficulties or surmount the problems with endurance and dignity. Often it ends in sacrificing or death, but then that's the way a melodrama is constructed. Melodrama can also has several categories,

but some of the important ones are the Women's picture, the romantic drama and the maternal melodrama. For such kind of cinema, film theorist Molly Haskell draws our attention to women's films and family melodrama and raises questions about the esthetic and cultural significance of this kind of cinema.

There is also another important theorist, Thomas Elsaesser, according to whom, melodrama can be analyzed through complex *mise en scene* (and ideological criticisms). Elsaesser, also considers the family melodramas of the 1950s as the peak of Hollywood's achievement. In Hollywood, Douglas Sirk is considered one of the most melodramatic filmmakers. He is known for his melodramatic pictures and this is reflected through his tendency to create strong *mise en scene* including very strong primary colors, contrast of dark and light, exaggerated acting and gestures and emotional excess. So, the entire framework of *mise en scene* is employed here to create particular kind of a situation. As in most works of melodrama, startling background music. It tells you what to feel, this kind of, you know, you have slow romantic music playing in the background. This is a love scene; you are supposed to watch it with that kind of a mindset. You have action scene with lots of a, you know, heavy thumping background music and you are supposed to enjoy it accordingly.

There is a death scene or a tragic scene and there are violence playing in the background; you are to feel that this is; you are told to feel sorry for the protagonist. You are told that this is a tragic sequence. Sometimes filmmakers, who are innovative, experimental and more radical; they try to subvert these situations. Think of *Shaitan*, where a chase scene is punctuated with remix version of *Hawaa Hawaai* and *Khoya Khoya Chand*. So, filmmakers also try to experiment with background, but in melodrama, that is not possible. So, telling background music was another great hallmark of Sirk's cinema and reevaluation of Sirk as an auteur; it pointed out to the ideological critic that is ironic *mise en scene* operated on 1950s, Middle Class America. Sirk's major Hollywood films include *All that Heaven Allows*, *All I desire*, *Magnificent Obsession*, *Written on the Wind*, *There's Always Tomorrow*, *The Tarnished Angels*, *A Time to Love and A Time to Die* and *Imitation of Life*.

Melodrama, in *All that Heaven Allows* is central to its emotional impact. The hero played by Rock Hudson, that is Ron Kirby (refer time: 19:53) in his extra character called Ron Kirby. He is a gardener representing all that is natural and verdant. He shows the heroine Jane Wyman, who is a widow; the colorful world that is all around her, but

that she has never seen. The movie starts with Ron clipping a branch covered in golden leaves from a tree that stands in a so-called home of love. Later, the branch turns up and carries flower walls, but the color comes into play before Ron is, even a major part of her life and Cary opts to her, a locket red dress for her, did with someone called Harvy. He is a pleasant old guy, who either can't acknowledge or can't handle that her still vibrant sexuality has died along with her late husband. For the interiors, Sirk's dials back the color and uses bits of framing to tell his story. This is a famous television short at the end, where Cary's children gifts her with a television set and ask her to stay at home and she watches her own reflection in the television set. She has lost the love of her life, Ron leaves. She gives up on Ron, because she is too much under the pressures of society and her family, and that is the way, her children wanted to be in case.

So, she should be restricted to home and not, you know, go around in search of love. So, it is a very telling shot, where she ends up at home in her living room, watching television. This is mise en scene that uses very effectively to show as that Cary is finally boxed into her fate that she cannot escape. The film's plot could perhaps, it describes as a perfect melodrama as all of the principles like marital family and social struggler, are so deeply tied to one another, that if just one changes, then the entire plot is affected. So, this is the way melodrama is, you know, constructed. Another great example is *Mildred Pierce*; Michel Curtiz directed, Joan Crawford playing the title character, where Mildred Pierce divorces her husband, but who is an good for nothing character, still a pleasant man, but and after that she plunges into a different kind of social class, she has to struggle in order to support herself and two daughters. She enters the work force as a waitress and her daughter Rida; she views the work as beneath the dignity and lowly and degrading.

Throughout the film, all Mildred desires is to fulfill Rida's wishes and in turn, graduates from table server to business entrepreneur, by opening her own chain of restaurants. Rida recaps; Rida, on the other hand reaps the rewards from Mildred's hard work and constantly, desires more and takes all that Mildred has to offer the disasters and of the cycle signifies that the harder Mildred works, the harder she falls. This is one of the greatest women's women's melodrama ever made. In more recent time, you can consider film such as James Cameron's *Titanic* and its melodramatic feature. The rich girl meets poor boy and the doom love story and also, Terrence Malick melodrama, *The Tree of Life*, starring Brad Pitt In recent times, we have the enormously successful soap operas on Indian television, most of which are extremely, melodramatic in content. The idea is

that melodrama lives on and remains, continues to remain a very popular genre, despite its critics.

So, thank you very much and we will meet for our next class.