

# On Controversy's Path: Analysing the Period Drama Padmaavat

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## Abstract

India is a country with a rich multicultural history. And the Indian audience has a thirst to know their past. As an immersive art form, a film can transport its viewer into the world that is depicted on the screen, and thus history has been a popular subject for film makers and audience. A journey that started in the 1950s with films like *Anarkali* has continued over the years with films like *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, *Legend of Bhagat Singh*, *Manikarna: Queen of Jhansi*, *Samrat Prithviraj* and so many others. The journey for these films to the silver screen in recent years has not been an easy one, with many a historical film facing dissent from several sections in India. Perhaps one of the most widespread controversies in recent decades has been over the film *Padmaavat* that released in the year 2018.

This study explored the censorship debate that surrounded the film from 2017-2018 and the various factors and sides involved in it. The film that was panned by various groups was still a huge success at the box office. Using a case study approach, this research analysed this multi-faceted response to the historical film. Along with an in-depth analysis of the controversy, the present work also assessed the narrative tools, theme, characters, plot and other storytelling elements that have been employed in the making of the film. This helped construct a clear and concise timeline of the controversy and also to understand how a film maker may create a successful and engaging period film.

## INTRODUCTION

Films are an important tool of creative expression that immerses the viewers into the story and characters, thus creating a better emotional bond than other mediums. As an art form, cinema has had a splendid journey to reach the status that it enjoys today. Historical events and figures have always been a subject of great interest for filmmakers as well as the audience who can never get enough of it. In India, the journey for historical adaptations started in the 1950s with films like *Anarkali*, and traversed through the years with *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, *Asoka*, *Panipat*, *Padmaavat*, *Kesari*, *Tanhaji* and so many others. But the passage has not been easy as over the years, these films have been facing increased criticism, scrutiny and debate. The audience has become more discerning, the critics more vocal and the censors more careful. In recent

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years, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film *Padmaavat* got caught in this storm.

*Padmaavat*, a period drama that was all set to release in November 2017 was ultimately released in January 2018 due to a protracted spate of controversies. The historical film tells the story of queen Padmavati of *Chittor*, the embodiment of Rajput glory who allegedly self-immolated for her honour. The film was strongly opposed by several factions in the country for its distortion of history. "As a rhetoric, Bhansali intended to depict a representation of Indian perseverance, but instead sparked huge controversy" (Baum, 2020).

## Significance and Objective of the Study

Even though, *Padmaavat* was immersed in a spate of disputes, it still managed to rake in over 400 Crore Rupees in worldwide box office earnings (TNN, 2018). The debates and arguments that surrounded the film could not diminish the fact that it was an aesthetically sound film, which impressed its viewers. In view of this multifaceted response to the film, it is prudent to explore the various factors that contributed to it.

The proposed work aims to undertake an in-depth analysis of the controversy that surrounded Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2018 film *Padmaavat*. In addition, the study would also take an overview of the aesthetic tools and devices that the director has used to create a period film.

## Research Methodology

A detailed study of the film was conducted to assess and better grasp the narrative tools and to establish the theme, characters, plot, and other storytelling elements that have been used while making *Padmaavat*. Also, a scrutiny of various newspapers, magazines, news channels and online media helped construct a clear timeline and understanding of the reasons for the long-drawn-out controversy that followed the film.

## Analysis and Findings

In order to facilitate a clear understanding of the events that led to and became a part of the controversy that developed around the film while

it was being shot and continued even after it was released; several journalistic and research works were studied. Also, a detailed examination of the film was also conducted to analyse various cinematic elements and aesthetic devices that were used by the director and the creative team to bring this period drama to life on the big screen. This comprehensive analysis and findings are discussed below.

## Controversies Galore

During the shoot of the film at Jaigarh Fort in Jaipur, the film's director, Sanjay Leela Bhansali was attacked by a mob and shooting equipment damaged. The group that comprised mainly of the members of the social group *Shri Rajput Karni Sena* were bent upon stopping the shoot of the film, as they believed "The film is presenting wrong facts about 'Padmavati'. Our basic protest is about distortion of historic facts which will not be tolerated" (PTI, 2017). Even though several actors, directors and producers came out to support Bhansali's right to freedom of expression, the protests continued and the matter escalated.

Due to this the director shifted the location of shoot from Jaipur to Kohlapur, but another mob followed him there, claiming that the film showed a romantic sequence between Alaudinn Khilji and Padmavati. This prompted Bhansali to release a formal letter renouncing the claim of the alleged dream sequence. Although things seemed to cool down, the debate kicked up again around Diwali that year when the poster of the film was released and kept gaining heat for months (Trends Desk, 2017). A petition was filed seeking to ban the film, which was rejected on grounds of freedom of expression by the Supreme Court. The *Karni Sena* threatened to burn theatres if the film was released without getting an approval from them (Outlook Web Bureau, 2017). Meanwhile the film's CBFC certification application was returned due to a technicality, which delayed its release. The dissent during this time reached other states including Bihar, UP, Gujarat and Karnataka, where posters were torn off and cinema halls attacked. (HT Correspondent, 2018). In late 2017, several historians and members of the *Mewar* royal family were invited to be a part of the CBFC panel to certify the film. Five changes were suggested to the



director. Change the title of the film from *Padmavati* to *Padmaavat*. Two disclaimers were also added – one to condemn the practice of *Sati* and the other one to clarify that the film was based on *Malik Muhammad Jayasi's* fictional poem *Padmaavat* (News18, 2017). Changes were to be made to the song *Ghoomar* so as not to show the actress' waist – which was later covered graphically (Deccan Chronicle, 2018). Even after CBFC's clearance, the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Haryana tried to ban the film and the Supreme Court intervened again against this. The film released worldwide on January 25, 2018, except in states like Rajasthan which did not allow its release citing law and order problems (Hindu Correspondent, 2018).

## The Plot

Set in 13<sup>th</sup> century India, when the Afghan ruler Alaudinn Khilji (Ranveer Singh) conquers the throne of Delhi after killing his uncle and his wife's father, Jalaluddin Khilji (Raza Murad). Khilji appreciates and collects beautiful and rare artifacts – clothes, jewels, rare stones, exotic birds and even humans. And the beautiful lands of Indian were to be the crown of his collection.

At the same time, in the city of Chittor is another king – Maharawal Ratan Singh (Shahid Kapoor) a valiant Rajput with a strict moral code of conduct. He marries princess Padmavati (Deepika Padukone) of Singhal when he visits the kingdom to buy pearls for his first wife Nagmati (Anupriya Goenka). The new queen is a rare beauty and is hailed for her looks and sense of duty in her new home. Soon after their wedding, Ratan Singh banishes his long-time teacher, *Rajguru*<sup>1</sup> Raghava Chetan (Aayam Mehta) for spying on the couple in their private moments. After leaving Chittor, Chetan reaches Khilji's court where he extols Padmavati's beauty in front of the Sultan, instigating him to attack Chittor. After sitting for months in the Rajasthan desert, Khilji's army is unable to breach the fort. As a ploy, Khilji visits Ratan Singh unarmed hoping to catch a glimpse of his beautiful queen. When this fails, Khilji invites Ratan Singh for a peacemaking visit to his camp where he abducts the Rajput king and takes him to the capital. He then sends a missive to Padmavati

to come to Delhi in exchange for her husband's freedom. Padmavati decides to comply but sets her own conditions for the visit and as an acceptance of her conditions she is sent Raghava Chetan's head. After this Padmavati sets out for Delhi with eight hundred soldiers disguised as her ladies-in-waiting.

In Delhi, Khilji's wife Mehrunissa (Aditi Roy Hyadri), meets Padmavati on her arrival and instead of taking her to the Sultan, frees Ratan Singh from his prison and shows the Rajput couple secret tunnels from where they escape and reach Chittor. After this deceit, Khilji launches a fresh attack on Chittor with a huge army and heavy artillery. When Padmavati refuses to surrender to him, he deceitfully kills Ratan Singh in a one-to-one duel. The Afghan army then goes about attacking the fort and Khilji looks for Padmavati, but the queen along with Nagmati and all the other women commit *Jauhar*<sup>2</sup> before he can get to them.

An elaborately made period film with grand sets, period costumes and dramatic lighting, the film is a treat for the viewer's senses. A result of the creative use of different cinematic tools by the director, as analysed in the following sections.

## Shots and Lighting

Artistically shot with meticulous detail, Padmaavat showcased two very diverse worlds of highly different people – the Rajputs and the Afghans. A different look with visual drama has been created for both, which evoke varying emotions in the viewer. "Chittor was a very pristine, royal place while Khilji's world was rustic, raw yet terribly attractive" (Fulara, 2018). In shots of the Afghans and particularly Khilji, the makers have employed low key lighting along with a heavy use of close, mid and low angle shots. All of these worked to create a looming, menacing and larger than life image of the Delhi Sultan. With the use of different types of shots and lighting, the cinematographer, Sudeep Chatterjee managed to "guide the audience's eye to the drama" (Ramnath, 2018) in each sequence. In contrast to Khilji's space is Ratan Singh and Padmavati's palace, a graceful airy space that is full of light. The grand sets where the film has been shot work to create its overall look. An extensive use of wide-angle shots, with layered

1 Royal teacher

2 Mass self-immolation

lighting created a depth for the backgrounds. Even the close-up shots were filmed using wide angle lenses in order to give more detail and enhance the sets in the background.

Contributing to the authenticity of the film are the flickering lights used throughout the film. Chatterjee in an interview explained this, "in the fourteenth century of *Padmaavat*'s setting, glass wasn't so widely prevalent, and therefore, the light sources were open to the air. They would flicker a lot" (Ramnath, 2018). This wavy effect of the light reached a peak in the now famous *Jauhar* scene of the film. The fire though wasn't real and it took a lot of work during the production and post production to realise the "image that director wanted to create – 'a river of red flowing into the fire'. Dino lights were put on the floor to reflect of the faces to make it look like they were approaching the fire" (Parasuraman, 2020). The effect of smoke was created by burning tyres and paraffin lamps were used to further enhance the flickering. The scene reached a crescendo as the women reached the fire, Khilji ran through the palace and the door shuts in his face.

## Aural Delight

Audio plays as important a part in cinema as visuals do. *Padmaavat*'s situational songs and musical score works in tandem with the visuals to enhance the impact on the viewer. The song that was at the centre of the film's controversy – *Ghoomar* – is a celebratory situational song. A form of Rajasthani folk music it is sung by "Rajasthani women in their homes during weddings and rituals" (Khurana, 2018). Bringing the festival of colours to life in the movie is the song – *Holi* – another folk composition. While *Ghoomar* has notes of nagaada, khartaal and shehnai; *Holi* based on Raag Miyan Malhar features notes of Manganiyar and Langa composition (Nair, 2018).

Enhancing the Mid Eastern look of the feel are two songs with Arabic undertones – *Binte Dil* and *Khalibali*. A high tempo song it "celebrates Khilji's obsession and showcases him as his darkest and wicked best" (Express Web Desk, 2018). On one hand *Khalibali* has an aggression to it, on the other *Binte Dil* is 'sultry song' which highlights the pain of unrequited love (Nair, 2018).

Love – obsessive for some and young and innocent for others – being the main premise of the film, it features two more romantic songs. Through the soothing notes of raag Sarbari and a Sitar background in *Nainowale Ne*, a young newly married woman is reflecting on the changes and happiness love has brought in her life. Also featured is a Hindustani song *Ek Dil Ek Jaan*, with hints of Raag Yaman and Qawaali (Nair, 2018).

Not just the songs woven through the narrative, but the background music throughout the film plays a key role. The high tempo music strikes fear when the Khiljis face off the Mongols while the sweet notes of the flute in the Rajput palace create a peaceful atmosphere. The appropriate situational musical score and songs keep the narrative tightly knit and take the storyline forward in several key points.

## Colour Symbolism

Colours are powerful mood setters and have the tendency of creating varied psychological reactions. In the structure of the film, colours play a key role especially in distinguishing different places. As the opening credits roll out on a saffron background – the colour of fire – that purifies and strengthens (Sharma, 2016), it immediately sets the tone of the narrative.

The different locales in the movie are infused with different colour palettes to create vivid imagery. The Singhal Forest of *Padmaavati*'s home is study in green and white, creating such a tranquil atmosphere that Ratan Singh decides to forgo the comforts of the palace to spend time there. "An emotionally calming color, green creates a sense of refreshment, harmony, and equilibrium" (Kurt & Osueke, 2014). The sequences featured there take on a dreamlike quality filling the audience with peaceful serenity.

Brown is a colour that features heavily in the film. Both the Khilji Palace and the Mewar landscape are brown, but both create a different effect and arouse opposing emotions. This colour can evoke different feeling according to its uses. Like many other dark colours, brown creates a feeling hopelessness and defeat when seen in large rolling stretches, just like in the Rajasthan desert when the Khilji army starts feeling helpless after the long wait. The dull



brown creates a strong feeling of despair. While, in the brown Khilji Palace, one gets the feeling of a place that is infallible and strong. Although huge, the palace also appears a dingy depressing space as a reflection of its ruler's soul. On the other hand, the brown of the Chittor palace creates a grandiose and sophisticated space. Although dominated by a muted brown, the airy spaces evoke a feeling of "resilience, dependability, security, and safety" (Cherry, 2020).

Not just the spaces but the costumes in the film are also infused with colour symbolism, reflecting the qualities of the wearer. For instance, Padmaavati while in Singhal dresses in stark white and blends in with the peaceful atmosphere. After her arrival in Chittor she is seen in delightful reds and pinks of the Rajput attire. The colours in the Rajput garbs are a reflection of their culture and traditions. Similarly, Khilji's clothing is symbolic of his qualities. He is usually seen in black or extremely dark colours throughout the film – a reflection of his character "as the bringer of pain and death" (Prasad, 2019). It is important to note that since Padmaavat is a period film, the creators have kept in mind the limitations of colours available during the time period, thus the costumes feature limited palettes.

The colour symbolism peaks in the *Jauhar* scene when all the women are dressed in shades of red – a colour of passion, anger, courage and strength. As the women walk down the steps towards the raging fire, it seems as if a blood red river is flowing through the fort. It creates a heightened sense of anxiety in the viewer, acting as a stimulant.

## Jewellery and Costumes

A period film rests largely on its ability to authentically portray the time period it is set in. This can be achieved with minute "attention to visual detail and use of vivid colours, fabulous jewellery and period costumes" (Khan, 2011). For Padmaavat, its costume designers Rimple and Harpreet Narula, convincingly created the fourteenth century looks to "convey emotions, seasons, customs and ceremonies" (Panwar, 2018). Through extensive research that relied heavily on a study of miniature paintings, they created styles reflective not only of the time period but also each character's traits.

The clothes for Rajput royals were hand embroidered by artisans from Sanganer, Jaipur, Benares, and Lucknow (Lifestyle Desk, 2017). Being a desert region, the attire features a lot of mul and cotton clothes dyed with vegetable colours to reflect the fourteenth century colours. Although limited in colours, the clothes are rich, vibrant and exquisite.

The clothes for the Afghan royals though dark hued were made of rich velvets and silks, reflective of their roots. Their clothes featured intricate patterns and the jewel tones of Mehrunissa's attire made her seem softer than the dark and menacing Khilji. Though they were royals, the Afghan king and queen still had nomadic ancestry, and this was reflected in the style and cuts of their clothes.

An authentic royal look would not have been complete without period jewellery and accessories. Alaudinn Khilji sports rare, precious jewels from the time he kills his father-in-law and declares himself sultan, like the precious amethyst stone that he sets in his crown. Mehrunissa's jewellery is reflective of her Turkish ancestry and features elaborate head pieces, rings, necklaces, *chandbaali* (moon shaped) earrings that also reflect her status. The Rajput queens – Padmaavati and Nagmati – were adorned with traditional Rajasthani jewellery including earrings, bangles, heavy necklaces pieces, *bor* (forehead adornment), and *nathni* (nose ring). Ratan Singh's attire was augmented with ornate turbans, belts, and necklaces. Through their creativity, patience and attention to detail, the designers delivered a product that was as accurate as possible (Rediff Bureau, 2018).

## Black or White Personas

The film was promoted as the tale of valour of a historic queen and was seen by the audience as a tragic love story, but the underlying premise of it was just a tussle between the good and the bad. Khilji – the evil incarnate and the Rajputs – a loving couple whose lives were cut short by the said evil. The director divided the two with unyielding boundaries of black and white that featured no shades of gray in the characterisation. An attempt to "glorify the generosity of Hindu king Ratansen and made the Muslim emperor as a very cruel and notorious person" (Mursalin, 2020). The Rajput king



features strong moral values and a Rajput code of conduct and does not even entertain evil thoughts, so much so that he refuses to kill an unarmed Khilji when he visits the Chittor palace. Khilji "is portrayed in a very sharp spectrum as well, leaving no room for complexity. He's demonic, savage and outright evil" (Nagpal, 2018). The demarcation is so rigid that Khilji comes across as a "violent and hypermasculine beast while Singh is very upright in every sphere of his life" (Hannula, 2020; Mursalin, 2020).

The one character in the film that showcases shades of gray is queen Padmaavati. Although, not evil or bad she is realistic and has no qualms about plotting against Khilji for the her and her family's survival. She even questions Ratan Singh when he refuses to kill Khilji in the fort. Although the king considers her thoughts blasphemous, she understands that Khilji is not what he appears to be. She recognises that the decision to let him walk away alive could cost them heavily which Ratan Singh in his naiveite refuses to acknowledge. He also does not recognise that Khilji's invitation to visit the Afghan camp is a ploy, but Padmaavati is able to anticipate the move and later successfully plots her husbands rescue from the Sultan's Delhi prison.

## Patriarchal Galore

if one scratches the surface, and looks beyond Padmaavati's dedication, valour and sacrifice, it is apparent that she is also a victim of patriarchy. Situated within traditional gender ideology where the men are the decision makers and the women their followers, the film is an account of the times in which it is situated. "Historical films are about the ideology of the time of their making, even more so than they are about the historical moment they seek to describe" (Hannula, 2020).

The story rests on the tussle between two men over a woman – a woman who has no say in the decision. The woman who is only sought for her beauty and not her intelligence or wit. Khilji has never met Padmaavati, and has only heard of her beauty yet he is bent upon acquiring her just like he acquires exotic pets and precious jewels – an inanimate object. Ratan Singh also does not want to give her up and treats her like a material possession and the only time he acknowledges her as an

intelligent human is in front of Raghava Chetan upon their marriage. For the rest of the narrative, she is treated with condescension and even derision when she tries to have more agency. She was never involved in administrative or military tasks even though she was clearly a better strategist and much shrewder than her husband. Her only role was to be a dutiful wife and an honourable queen. Not just her life but her death was dependent on her husband's permission. She could not end her life and escape Khilji's clutches without Ratan Singh's approval to commit suicide in case he perishes in the war.

Just like Padmaavati, Nagmati and Mehrunissa are situated in misogynistic environments. Nagmati is completely ignored and almost forgotten by her husband after his second marriage. She is relegated to the sidelines while Padmaavati at least gets her husband's attention. Mehrunissa is constantly subject to emotional torture and insults by her husband. He cheats on her on their wedding day, kills her father, and obsesses over another woman, while she looks on. As soon as she asserts a little bit of her power by releasing Ratan Singh and helping Padmaavati, she is imprisoned by her husband.

The celebrated sacrifice of queen Padmaavati – the *Jauhar* – was the most contentious part of the film. Hailed as Khilji's biggest defeat, it shows women – young, old, pregnant, children – walking into a raging fire. In a country that took years to eradicate the practice of *Sati*, and in the state (Rajasthan) with the lowest female literacy rate - 57.6% (Khan, 2020) and one of the worst female foeticide figures, the release of Padmaavati was seen as a step backwards. While for the men it may be a matter of pride, for the Rajput women "Padmaavati was never a role model for them and now they can see a hardening of conservative and patriarchal attitudes, especially after the period drama was pitted against Rajput honour" (Huffington Post, 2018).

Even though the film celebrates the valour of a queen who at first glance appears to be strong woman, the portrayal is patriarchal picture as dictated by tradition. Any deviation to portray things in a different light or give women more agency is seen as a blow to these traditions and opposed heavily by the upholders of the ruling ideology.



## CONCLUSION

This case study was an attempt to better understand the various narrative tools that film auteurs use to create a successful and engaging cinematic work of art. Apart from an interesting story to tell a film maker employs a plethora of aesthetic devices ranging from good actors to outstanding use of symbolism in the narrative. Using period costumes and jewellery, vibrant colours, stunning sets, artistic lighting, detailed shots, and engaging music; the director transported the viewer to thirteenth century Rajasthan. Despite the controversy that surrounded the film for months, the creatively striking period drama was well appreciated by the audience worldwide. Even though the status of queen Padmini's story (as a historical fact or legend) is an ongoing debate, its cinematic presentation was a visual treat.

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