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Kahaani (2012)

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The award-winning Bollywood movie *Kahaani* (Hindi lit. ‘story’, ‘account’) was released on 9 March 2012, and soon after gained attention and critical acclaim for several reasons. For instance, the film was shot in only 64 days and while produced on a shoestring budget of 80 million INR (approx. 1.2 million USD) it earned 1.04 billion INR (approx. 15 million USD) in just 50 days after its release. What caused even more public appreciation than the economic success, though, were *Kahaani*’s specific film-making techniques (visuals) and the innovative content (narrative).

The film’s plot is set in the city of Kolkata, West Bengal. This is important information and an immediate setting-in-scene for the audiences for several reasons. Known for its unique history and appreciated as one of the most important places in India with a distinct Bengali ‘flavor’, Kolkata is, among other things, home to the arguably most popular and widespread Hindu festival, Durgapuja. By today, the festival is celebrated in many parts of India and has travelled around the globe with especially Bengali Indian migrant communities. But at the same time, Durgapuja as celebrated in Kolkata today is recognized by many as having not only Bengali origins but also an inherently Bengali nature. And it is precisely the specifically Bengali references which feature throughout the film, on many levels.

Not surprisingly, the festival Durgapuja itself plays a prominent role in the film. In fact, most of the film is set during the preparations for and celebrations of the Bengali style Kolkata Durgapuja. The representation of the festival’s grandeur, including of the typical large, colorful and densely visited celebration spaces, the so-called pandals, and of processions, form the visual background settings for much of the film narrative. But much in line with *Kahaani*’s overall innovative approach of filmic storytelling, these joyful, carefree scenes from Durgapuja are heavily contrasted with the film’s partly very dense distressing or gloomy happenings in the storyline. Visuals such as the highly agitated, troubled heroine running along a procession have been chosen as film posters, thus contributing to a very unique representation of Durgapuja.

That is, Bengaliness in the film is not only highlighted by simply choosing Kolkata as the film’s geographical location and Durgapuja as the time for much of the film’s narrative. Many film reviews praised that the city is portrayed in a way near to everyday life and that the film rather accurately uncovers local Bengali specifics. For instance, the film crew consisted of many local Kolkata inhabitants – it is very likely that they enabled the guerrilla-tactic shooting practices in the city which add to the film’s lively feeling. In order to achieve such a local flair, the director Sujoy Ghosh also casted many Bengali actors. As this somewhat goes against standard practices or at least expectations of actor

hiring in Bollywood, these decisions caused surprise and even some stirring in the Bollywood film industry.

On a more subtle level, Bengali identity is interwoven into *Kahaani* for instance by making repeated allusions to films of the revered Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray. With this, the film consciously works against stereotypical representations of the diverse Indian ethnicities in Bollywood cinema and differs from the still often prevalent notion of '[a] key form of discursive identity construction in the movies happen through the process of reification, as characters overexaggerate certain stereotypical characteristics associated with particular ethnicities.'¹

Overall, the film was very well received, on both audiences and critic's levels, and did very well in the box office. It was nominated for several awards in India, and won most of these. At the annual Indian Filmfare Awards, in our case the 58th Annual Filmfare Awards, *Kahaani* won five out of six nominations, including the prestigious Best Director and Best Actress Awards. On several other occasions, the film won numerous other awards, including Best Film, Best Screenplay, and several more Best Actress Awards. Also, the film's success prompted the release of *Kahaani 2* in 2016. While the film by the same director and lead actress Vidya Balan is unrelated to *Kahaani* in content, also the former showcases a strong female lead role, in Kolkata.

Note

1. Roy, "What's in a Name?" 101.

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