



MONOMYTHS, MOVING TRAINS AND MOTION PICTURES

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ABSTRACT

Theatrical brilliance coupled with the choicest of settings as a prerequisite for the plot is a characteristic of Bollywood. Trains and railway stations set the dramatic turn of events in a Bollywood movie more often than one might imagine. Time and again, screenwriters have chosen trains as their preferred location for a revelation, meet-cute, accident, action sequence, or even a dance number to punctuate the movie's plot. Even if railways are not central to the plot, the train scenes in these movies are the plot points which lead to peripeteia, the protagonist's destiny. This paper employs Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth to study a few selected films to highlight how settings involving railway locations drive the plot of Bollywood films and shape the Bollywood hero's character arc.

Keywords: Monomyth, Film Studies, Railways in Movies, Trains as Setting in Bollywood.

The narrative archetypes advanced by Aristotle and Joseph Campbell provide a fundamental framework for understanding the essence of storytelling, emphasising the universal presence of key elements such as the inciting incident, the revelation or anagnorisis, and the reversal of fate or peripeteia. Or as Campbell refers to it, the monomyth plot structure. From the tragedies of ancient Greece to the captivating narratives of contemporary cinema, this structure remains steadfast in its significance. According to Stuart Voytilla (1999), this model is an "all-embracing metaphor for the deep inner journey of transformation that heroes in every time and place seem to share, a path that leads them through great movements of separation, descent, ordeal, and return". Voytilla, in her book *Myth and the Movies: Discovering the Mythic Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films*, has analysed fifty Hollywood movies using the monomyth.

This model readily applies to the Bollywood too. Within the realm of Bollywood cinema, a typical story is steered by an intricate plot line that mirrors the complexities of human experience. The journey of the hero is guided by a myriad plot points that shape his character arc. From the initial conflict to the profound transformations — both internal and external — that ensue, the hero's odyssey is punctuated by various stages of character development.

Aristotle considers setting and atmosphere as two of the major components that go into making a story. Not only is an appropriate setting necessary for the plotline, but sometimes it can also be used as a tool for symbolism or as a metaphor by the screenwriter. The setting can mirror the internal landscape of characters, underscore thematic motifs, and evoke a range of emotions in the audience. Indian railways is a recurrent example for this, in the case of Bollywood movies. At these trains and railway stations, the hero embarks on his literal and metaphorical journey. This way, the Indian railways cease to be mere settings; they significantly shape the narrative landscape of the movie. A setting involving a train or a railway station is used to prompt a Bollywood hero's call to adventure more frequently than one might think. By examining the role of trains in a few notable Bollywood movies, we can uncover the deeper significance of this recurring motif and its connection to the hero's journey (Chakraborty, 2004). R. Kumar (2018) has also examined the role of trains in Indian cinema, focusing on how they represent change and transformation for the protagonist, delving into the cultural significance of train journeys in Indian storytelling.

This paper analyses the plots of a few selected films to bring out the significance of trains as a junction where the protagonist undergoes the most powerful parts of the monomyth.

The concept of monomyth was first introduced in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He summarises it as: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell, 1949).

The order of the twelve stages composing the Hero's Journey, which are used to analyse the selected movies in this paper, are depicted in the illustration below:



Figure 1: The Twelve stages of The Hero's Journey as developed by Joseph Campbell

There are many movies that feature trains as a tool to trigger the various stages of a hero's character arc in Bollywood. The first notable example is that of *Aradhana* (1969) where Arun (Rajesh Khanna) and Vandana (Sharmila Tagore) coincidentally encounter each other on the train as strangers. The song *Mere sapno ki rani* features Vandana in her 'ordinary world' and serves as a prologue to her 'call to adventure', a foreshadowing to her marrying Arun later in the movie.

The entire plot of *The Burning Train* (1980) revolves around Super Express, a high-speed train on its maiden journey that becomes the target of sabotage by a group of criminals led by Randhir (Danny Denzongpa). They plant a bomb in the train, triggering a massive explosion that sets the train

ablaze. Ashok (Dharmendra) and Ravi (Vinod Khanna), understand the gravity of the situation and prevent a major catastrophe by the end of the movie, thus completing their 'ordeal'. As a 'reward', they get to confront and solve their tense relationship with their respective lovers during their journey.

In *Sadma* (1983), in the climax, Somu (Kamal Haasan) limps his way to the railway station where he tries to get Nehalata's (Sridevi) attention at her train window seat by repeatedly calling out to her. But, much to his dismay, she has forgotten about their past and now perceives him as a deranged stranger. The train departs and Somu is left desolate at the station, shattered by the unexpected outcome. This plotline is uncannily similar to that of a Greek tragedy like *Antigone*, where the protagonist suffers an unfavourable outcome from his actions that he formerly believes to be righteous.

Some of the most iconic train scenes in Indian cinema are a part of the movie *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995). The central couple, Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) and Simran (Kajol), meet each other for the first time at a railway station and form each other's first impression during forced proximity in a train. This meet acts as their 'call to adventure', setting things in motion for the rest of the plot. In a later scene, they miss their train and start travelling together, which can be seen as their 'crossing the threshold'. In the climax of the movie, the two are united against all odds as Raj extends his hand for Simran to board the train which is symbolic of a 'happily ever after', or what Campbell labels the 'return with the elixir'.

The famous song *Chaiyya Chaiyya* from the movie *Dil Se..* (1998) is the backdrop for Amar's (Shah Rukh Khan) journey to Assam for his work as a journalist, where he unanticipatedly encounters Meghna (Manisha Koirala) on a moving train. Their meeting is characterised by a sense of intrigue and attraction. This marks the trope of the hero meeting 'tests, allies, and enemies' after crossing the threshold, which brings him to his scene of ordeal.

An example of an internal anagnorisis of the protagonist is in *Swades* (2004). As the train travels through the countryside, Mohan (Shah Rukh Khan) witnesses scenes of poverty, overcrowding, and deprivation in the countryside, which are in stark contrast to the familiar comforts of his life in America. The train journey makes Mohan accept a connection with his roots, making him, in Campbell's terms, 'cross the threshold' and commit to a greater cause.

Geet (Kareena Kapoor) and Aditya (Shahid Kapoor) from *Jab We Met* (2007) cross paths when they end up sharing a compartment on the train. Aditya, in a gloomy disposition due to personal and professional setbacks, gets off the train before the destination. Geet comes to the railway platform and persuades him to get back on the train as it is about to leave. In the meanwhile, the train departs and both of them are left at the station, stranded in the middle of nowhere. This is the turning point in their respective lives, when both of them abandon their previous journeys and start a new one together. This sequence of events ranges from them accepting their 'call to adventure' to 'crossing the threshold' in their respective character arcs.

In *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (2013), Naina (Deepika Padukone) suffers a dilemma before boarding the train for a trip to Manali, her 'call to adventure'. Her final decision to get onto the moving train initiates her journey of self-discovery that continues throughout the film. In another train scene that occurs during the second half of the film, Naina unexpectedly encounters Bunny (Ranbir Kapoor),

her former friend and love interest. This train scene serves as ‘the road back to the ordinary world’, a moment of closure and acceptance for both the characters as they discover a newfound sense of understanding and mutual respect.

In *Chennai Express* (2013), Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) reluctantly boards the Chennai Express train at his grandmother's request, only to get involuntarily involved with Meenamamma (Deepika Padukone), who is desperate to evade her pursuing relatives, and convinces Rahul to help her by pretending to be her fiancé. Here is when the original journey which Rahul set out for in the ‘ordinary world’ is long forgotten and his destiny is altered. This elaborate train scene encompasses the hero’s journey from the call to adventure, which is him boarding the train, to approaching the inmost cave, which is when he arrives at Meenamamma’s hometown.

M S Dhoni: The Untold Story (2016) is another vivid example in which the protagonist Mahendra Singh Dhoni (Sushant Singh Rajput) gets a deeper understanding of his circumstances when he makes a bold decision to disembark from the train before reaching his destination. This act is symbolic of Dhoni's departure from the conventional path of a railway job and his leap of faith towards his cricketing ambitions; it can be considered a consequence of his ‘refusal of the call’. This movie also uses the railway station for the hero to fulfil the ‘meeting the mentor’ trope. Another dramatic train scene foreshadows the hero’s ‘return with the elixir’, when he hears the echo of his future success in the train’s horn.

In *Secret Superstar* (2017), the protagonist Insiya (Zaira Wasim) experiences a mix of emotions — fear, uncertainty, and excitement as she boards the train to leave home to pursue her dreams against her oppressive father’s will. This is when she ‘crosses the threshold’ and enters the ‘special world’ of her being destined to become a singer by the end of the movie.

In Bollywood, trains are powerful symbols with very pertinent theatrical functions. Most often, they are used to depict new opportunities, and otherwise for missed opportunities. The time window and cinematographic space that a train scene provides is far more employable than that of any other vehicular setting. It gives screenwriters enough liberty to be creative; it creates the perfect opportunity to create suspense, and often simultaneously, hope, in the audience. If not for the train’s call to adventure, the plot of the movies mentioned in this paper would remain stagnant and so would the protagonist’s character arc. This establishes the multifaceted role of trains in Indian cinema as powerful narrative devices.

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