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## Surge in Korean film remakes in India

BY **GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN** on JUNE 26, 2016 in [ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES](#), [INDIA](#), [KOREAS](#)

This may be hard to believe, but Bollywood is beginning to borrow from Korean cinema, and not just ideas or inspiration, but a film in all its entirety. For a long time, Bollywood — which is essentially Hindi movies — and the various other Indian language films have been copying Hollywood, sometimes frame by frame (*It Happened One Night/Dil Hai Ke Manta Nahin* is a classic example), and even European pictures, but South Korea seems to be the new seducer on the skyline.

As recently as June 10, two Bollywood blockbusters — *TE3N* and *Do Lafzon Ki Kahani* — hit the screens, and both were remade from Korean dramas, and acknowledged. While *TE3N*, with an iconic star like Amitabh Bachchan playing a pivotal role, was plotted out of the 2013 *Montage*, *Do Lafzon Ki Kahani* emerged from Song Il-gon's (renowned independent director known for *Magicians*, *Flower Island* and the superb psychological thriller, *Spider Forest*) *Always* (2011).

"Korean cinema, as a fount of inspiration for Hindi cinema, is a sudden influence that was first seen in the last decade, but more actively in recent times", says Vinod Mirani, a trade analyst.



Amitabh Bachchan (L) and Vidya Balan in *TE3N*, a remake from the South Korean film *Montage*



A still from the South Korean film *Montage*

"Since we do not have good writers, or good writers do not get sufficiently paid, our movie-makers need to look outside for stories. Hollywood films are now released simultaneously here, so that is no longer a hot source. European cinema as good as does not exist. And stories from Asian sources somehow have greater identification with India," says Mirani.

Music and high emotional quotient are very apparent commonalities.

(Indeed, Indian movies — much like Indian lifestyle — is full of music. It may be songs or background score — which though more often than not can be intrusive, drowning dialogues and marring the beauty of hyphenated silences.)



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However, since Korean cinema is often clinically narrated and is laced with crime and violence that leave little scope for tears and heartache, Indian writers and directors have usually felt the need to tinker with it.

*TE3N* is a great example of this. Suresh Nair, who co-wrote and co-produced the Hindi film, says: "Most Korean movies are thrillers. They also tend to be grim and dark and while we have to adapt them to our audiences, certain changes would look odd in the basic tenor. What we did with *Montage* was, however, something of a high for us. We removed the character of the mother, who was the protagonist in that film, and made it a grandfather-grandchild story. The idea was to cast Amitabh Bachchan in that role. Also, the policeman played in my movie by Nawazuddin Siddiqui is just an ex-cop in *Montage*. But in my film, he becomes a priest."

One presumes that the mother in *Montage* who loses her little daughter and sets out to find the culprit would have certainly lent herself to a high degree of emotionalism, but this was a path much traversed in Indian cinema. Sometime ago, we saw the glamorous star and Cannes regular Aishwarya Rai play a distraught mother in *Jazbaa* who leaves no stone unturned to find her missing daughter.

So, the mother in *Montage* was replaced by a grandfather in *TE3N* — a role essayed by Bachchan. And his commercial viability is impressive now. The movie changed something else as well to attract footfalls into theatres. It roped in the attractive Bollywood actress, Vidya Balan, to portray a cop, and in the producers' eagerness to infuse as much glamour as possible into the film, Balan was never seen in uniform. For, that would have made her look dull and less ravishing. And Siddiqui as a Christian priest gave the movie another unique angle. In the original Korean edition, there were no policewomen.

Yes, the core plot of a kidnap-for-ransom gone wrong in *Montage* has been replicated in *TE3N*, and so too many scenes. I watched both versions, and found that while the Korean adventure was precise, objective and thrilling, the Bollywood work was meandering and emotional, and much less of a thriller.

"Thrillers, especially suspense thrillers, are appreciated, but as movies, they have a smaller yet dedicated audience, for whom they can become cult films, like *Jewel Thief* (a superb hit in the late 1960s) for me," explains Nair. "Budgets have to be right as they can never be blockbusters. The scenario is similar in Hollywood."

*Always* (2011), which was remade into *Do Lafzon Ki Kahani*, was not a thriller. It is a hauntingly beautiful romance that had an interesting lead pair — popular television actor So Ji-sub (who won praise for his recent *Rough Cut* by Jang Hoon) and fellow television actress Han Hyo-ju (of *Dong Yi* and *Brilliant Legacy* fame). *Always* opened the 2011 Busan International Film Festival and went on to become a blockbuster.

*Do Lafzon Ki Kahani* follows more or less the same path as its Korean original (which in 2015 also inspired a Kannada language title, *Boxer*), and for the Bollywood directors, Kshitij Gulati and Deepak Tijori, this could not have been difficult. For, Korean cinema can also be weepy and melodramatic like much of Indian cinema is.



Randeep Hooda (L) and Kajal Aggarwal in *Do Lafzon Ki Kahani*, a remake from the South Korean film *Always*



A still from the South Korean film *Always*

The movie tells us the touching story of a boxer — who steps out of the ring after a series of misfortunes — and a blind girl he meets. She needs a huge amount of money to get her sight restored, and the man gets back to boxing for his love. In the Hindi film, actor Randeep Hooda (last seen in *Sarbjit*) and actress Kajal Aggarwal play the lead stepping into the shoes of So and Han respectively.

These are two examples of several, and I would think that the essential plot line of

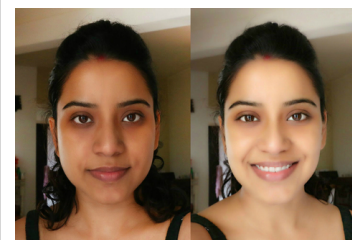


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Korean movies — dramatic twists, violence and romance — goes very well with Indian audiences, who are seeking a fare different from the moralistic overtones which Indian pictures have been famously dishing out.

In such a scenario, the 2016 Cannes competition title from South Korea, *The Handmaiden*, by Park Chan-wook, may get remade into an Indian language movie. Talks are on.

*The Handmaiden* has been adapted from Sarah Waters' Victorian era lesbian novel called *Fingersmith*. The story has been translocated to Japan, and marks the return of the director to Korean language production after his English debut, *Stoker*. *The Handmaiden* is a thriller of sorts that tells us the story of a Korean woman in the 1930s in a criminal pact with an aristocratic swindler, who is trying to fool a rich Japanese heiress into marrying him.

Park, who won the Grand Prix for *Oldboy* at Cannes in 2003 and the Jury Prize for his *Thirst* in 2009, [said in an interview](#) at Cannes that he had read the novel some years ago and had found the 'plot twist' fascinating.

"We needed an era with a caste system employing handmaidens, but also with the modern institution of insane asylums. My producer suggested bringing the story to Korea, during the era under Japanese imperialist rule. I thought I could do something that looked at the period from a different angle," Park added.

So, it may well be the best of times for Korean remakes in India, but one also hopes that the cultural wing of the South Korean Embassy in India takes this opportunity to show films from its country. A feeble attempt was made last year in Chennai by the South Korean Consulate, but a rather unattractive patronage discouraged them from moving forward.

*Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and Seoul Times.*

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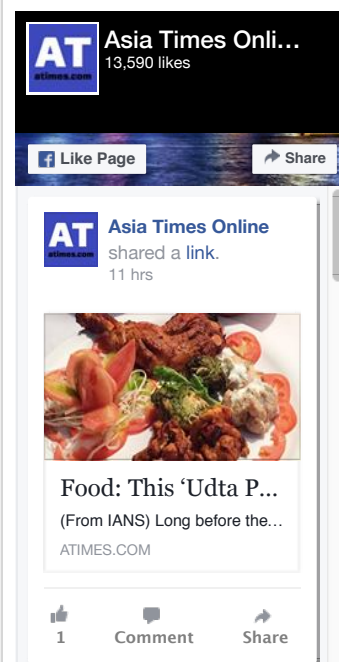
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