

From Colonial Game to National Glory: Postcolonial Triumph in Sports Biopic

83

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Abstract

Kabir Khan's 83 (2021) uses the real-life story of India's 1983 Cricket World Cup victory to narrate a powerful postcolonial assertion of national identity. Cricket, which was once a colonial game introduced by the British to keep cultural dominance, 83 become a symbolic space of reversal and resistance. The movie places cricket at the centre of India's struggle for dignity, solidarity, and recognition among the world's leading nations in the aftermath of colonialism. 83, therefore, through the dramatisation of Kapil Dev's captaincy and the 1983 squad, turns cricket into a source of power, where the colonised have the authority to revise the old story of oppression to one of confidence and triumph. The film recreated the historic event in such a way that it presented both factual and emotional aspects, thus demonstrating not only the sportsmanlike side of the matter but also emphasising the cultural context of the event. The film, through its visuals, patriotism, and team spirit, suggests that the 1983 win was not merely a sporting event but rather a statement of decolonisation and the former colony's return to power over the metropolis.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, national identity, decolonisation, cultural resistance.

Introduction

Cricket is often associated with the label of being the 'gentleman's game'. It is a game steeped in the tradition of empire. As part of the British colonial civilising mission, the British introduced a sport that would later come to represent discipline, hierarchy, and imperial superiority in India. However, nowadays, cricket is considered in India, among other things, a means of both cultural reclamation and sustaining national pride. Kabir Khan's 83 (2021) is an example of such a transition, in which the film transforms the imperial playing field into a vehicle for postcolonial victory and identity construction by dramatising the Indian triumph at the 1983 Cricket World Cup. Along with celebrating the game itself, it shows a shift from exploitation to empowerment, in which the oppressed group finally overcomes their oppressors, right in the symbolic realm.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" is central to this process. According to Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), colonial mimicry creates an ambience of "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86). What Indian cricket players actually managed to do was absorb colonial culture and, within that framework, if necessary, expel the oppressors by overtaking them in the same arena. The statement in 83 indicates that the Indian players' participation in the coloniser's game to gain worldwide recognition has evolved from mere imitation into a dramatic transformation. Theirs is a triumph indicating change, i.e., a decolonisation act through performance, and not mere mimicry.

Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) is another point of reference for understanding this event. It highlights how the postcolonial subject's freedom is tied to the recovery of cultural agency. According to Fanon, decolonisation is "the making of new men" who devise new ways of identity outside colonial binaries (Fanon 36). In the movie 83, Kapil Dev's leadership embodies this new self, confident and uncolonised and, hence, capable of believing in victory. The victory of the team at Lord's Cricket Ground in London, where the empire's sporting tradition was held, is emblematic not only of the victory of cricket but also of the rewriting of power relations in history.

The Tao of Cricket (1989) by Ashis Nandy is another work that helps in this regard; here, Nandy refers to cricket as "an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English" (Nandy 7). The movie 83 centres on the irony that cricket is a tool of self-expression rather than oppression. The movie refigures the 1983 moment as one of fervent nationalism, in which the spheres of sport and cinema converge to craft a shared sense of belonging. The cinematic style of Kabir Khan—full of nostalgia, communal spirit, and rebellion—makes this triumph a metaphor for India's takeoff as a postcolonial nation with newfound confidence. Therefore, 83 is not just the story of a sports hero; it represents the culture of resistance through cinema. By dramatising national pride, collective effort, and historical memory, this film shows how postcolonial people reshape their identity through the power they have inherited.

Nationalism and Collective Identity in 83

Kabir Khan's 83 (2021) is a sports biopic that presents cricket as a unifying national narrative, allowing India to reimagine itself as a collective postcolonial nation with renewed confidence. The film deliberately dramatises India's 1983 World Cup triumph, turning it into a cultural myth and reaffirming the idea of India as a nation that has emerged from a shared history of struggle, unity, and resilience. So, the win is not just for the eleven on the field; it is the whole nation asserting its voice after the era of colonialism.

Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" can be effectively applied to understanding this change. For him, a nation is "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (*Imagined Communities*, 6). The nation in 83 is perceived through communal engagement. The film's storyline constantly draws a contrast between the cricket players and the fans, with the former on the field of play. In contrast, the latter are ordinary people of India watching the match from their homes, factories, and public places. This movie sequence breaks down barriers of class, caste, language, and religion, bringing together a community of emotions that

transcend societal divisions. The moment the World Cup is held aloft, it signifies the triumph of the sport and symbolises the coming together of many Indians under the umbrella of one nation.

The postcolonial nationalism portrayed in 83 is more of a show than a real political movement. It is performed through feeling, portrayal, and shared memory. The film's cinematography is very much in line with this; nationalism here is very much an emotional one—Kipli Dev's ecstatic smile at Lord's ground, the Indian tricolour dancing in the breeze, and the team decked in white catching the sun of the English skies are all very slow-motion shots that tell a story of a new India coming to be seen. This visibility is critical; as Homi Bhabha notes, the nation "is a narration" made through cultural performances that assert agency (*The Location of Culture* 145). Instead of narrating itself, India came into existence through the film 83, which portrays the victory as a shared happiness rather than through speeches or manifestos.

The film portrays nationalism as a combination of humility and inclusiveness, rather than aggression. The underdog image of the Indian cricket team in the movie makes it possible to talk about a kind of victory of ideals. Such a moral victory is linked to a victory over the arrogance of the colonisers, who have received their due reward for keeping their faith and team spirit. Cricket is presented as a game in which the previously oppressed can now confront their oppressors on equal terms. Thus, by virtue of being an arena for mutual struggle, cricket becomes a metaphor for democracy and bridges the gap between the old and the new.

Moreover, the film 83 promotes masculinity through the prism of nationalism. This is because the film's main character's heroism is based on a broader concept of faith and humanity than on the empire. Kapil Dev demonstrated his devotion in action, not just as the head of the team but also as a team member, leading the team to victory. His phrase "We are here to win" is presented as both a kind of salvation and the restoration of the honour of the entire nation. In the end, movie 83 builds nationalism in such a way that the spectator himself becomes a participant in the national movement. It was not nationalistic superiority, but the faith and devotion the cricket team showed the people that led to their victory. Artistic creativity makes it possible to feel the long-awaited triumph and break through the boundaries of the former epoch. The team's victory turned out to be a milestone in the process of healing from the old wounds of the national psyche. After defeating the metropolis in the symbolic sense, the Indian people were able to move on to new achievements, free from the dominance of the colonial master.

Cinema as Memory: Rewriting History through Emotion in 83

The film 83 (2021) not only goes beyond the typical biopic of a sports hero but also serves as a visual record of the people's shared memory. The film makes the 1983 Cricket World Cup victory a collective memory—a place where history, emotion, and national identity intersect. As such, it carries out what Homi K. Bhabha terms the "narration of the nation", whereby history is not only recalled but also creatively reworked through affect, representation, and performance (*The Location of Culture* 145). The film's recollection of the past is a storytelling approach from the culture's perspective, which allows the audience to relive the national moment of immense joy once again.

According to Pierre Nora in *Between Memory and History* (1989), cinema produces lieux de mémoire—"sites of memory" that retain the emotional side of the past. 83 is a perfect example of a film that fulfils this role. It serves as a historical bridge between the lived past and the remembered past, thereby establishing the 1983 event as film heritage. For many present-day audiences who were not alive at the time of the victory, the film is their first and likely only opportunity to experience that historical event. Through the effective use of historical materials, acting, and moving narration, Kabir Khan makes the past emotionally approachable.

Instead of portraying the characters as distant, cold figures from history, Kabir Khan presents them as decent individuals who embody India's diversity. For example, the moments when the group members share food that one of them has made at home, laugh using their local dialect, or pray before their games have the effect of making the heroes of sports less alien, less different from the people, thus providing a firm foundation for their fight in the shared spirit of the vast masses of the Indians. The finale sequence at Lord's Stadium is a classic example of how film can alter one's past through emotion. The cinematography effectively captures the anxiety of each delivery. At the same time, the film shows Indians praying, shouting, and crying in parallel shots across various parts of the country. Besides Pritam's background score, all the music used in the film enhances the emotional connection between the screen and the audience. The visual elements employed make the experience of witnessing the event at the cinema one of involvement; they are not just watching a game but actually going through a moment that helps to forge their collective identity again. Leveraging this emotional bond, the movie transcends national boundaries and reinterprets a homeland saga in which India's triumph is inextricably linked to the nation's awakening of its identity.

Kabir Khan's imagery also plays a significant role in conveying the postcolonial tone beneath his film. The Indian victory has changed the perception of Lord's Cricket Ground, which has long been considered the centre of British cricket. The shot of the Indian team in slow motion, with a World Cup in their hands and the Union Jack fluttering above them, symbolises a shift in the relationship between the colonies and the mother country. Frantz Fanon's idea of "reversal" fits perfectly in a situation in which the oppressed people become equal in the eyes of the oppressors (Fanon 43). Thus, it is not only the Indian team that achieves success on the sports field, but also the colonies and their cultural heritage. Referring to the concept of Frantz Fanon, it could be claimed that winning at Lord's Cricket Ground symbolised the fact that the team from the ex-colony has occupied the throne of the oppressor and turned it to its own use.

Besides that, 83 heavily relies on cinematic language—lighting, framing, sound, and montage—to elevate a sports story into a historical allegory. Rain on the ground, the floodlights cutting through the typical English gloom, and the players' faces, all soaked with sweat and hope, become metaphors for strength and revival. Kabir Khan's direction interweaves realism with mythmaking; thus, the film not only serves as a record but also as a source of motivation. As per Susan Hayward in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, film can "transform history into cultural memory through emotional engagement" (Hayward 98). 83 is a perfect example of this kind of work, where the factual

and emotional aspects are intertwined, ensuring the event is immortalised in the collective consciousness.

Besides, the film democratises remembrance of the past by allowing different voices to be heard. It does not focus only on those in power or on Cricket's urban narrative; instead, it depicts villagers, workers, and street children all shouting together. These shots underscore that the 1983 triumph was the people's, not only the players'. The camera frequently shows the faces of the crowd—women, children, and even aliens—thus reflecting cricket's worldwide appeal and its potential to transcend the limits of the Earth. This welcoming method redefines the concept of nationalism as one in which people actively participate, rather than a top-down one; hence, memory becomes a collective practice rather than a set of privileged archives.

The movie's representation of media and commentary further reflects how memory is mediated through different forms of communication. The sarcastic tone of foreign journalists at the beginning of the story changes dramatically after the media frenzy following the triumph; thus, it parallels India's move from colonial obscurity to global recognition. By dramatising the moments of live telecasts and seamlessly incorporating them into the actors' performances, 83 blurs the boundary between recording and invention, thus making cinema itself a historical agent.

Eventually, 83 showcases how cinema not only fabricates but also preserves and emotionalises history. The film evokes tears, pride, and nostalgia on viewers' faces through its profound emotional connection between memory and nationhood. Additionally, it returns the past to life for the new generation through its very existence, ensuring that the 1983 victory remains the source of collective confidence and pride. Through its cinematic portrayal, 83 accomplishes the challenging task of history, transforming facts into emotion, events into feeling, and victories into myth. The movie thus acts as a locus of postcolonial healing, employing the terminology of victory to tell a different story of defeat.

Conclusion

Thus, Kabir Khan's 83 dramatises the historic triumph of the Indian cricket team in the 1983 World Cup as a defining moment in India's postcolonial identity. It literally extends beyond the sports arena to narrate the story of India regaining its faith and identity after a hundred years or more of colonial rule. By making cricket a colonial legacy, the story of struggle and victory, the movie 83 becomes a part of the postcolonial nationalist discourse. The victory at Lord's, the epicentre of the British Empire, epitomises the triumphant return of the oppressed and symbolises a reversal of power. The film employs montage, close-ups of the characters' emotional faces, and shots of the crowd of fans watching the match together to forge a strong bond between the past and the present. It is an instance of Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an "imagined community", which connects people of different classes, languages, and regions through their shared feelings and pride. The portrayal of humility, teamwork, and trust in Kapil Dev's leadership is one of the elements that, after colonial masculinity, introduce a new Indian ethos of faith and collective spirit. 83 is not just about winning a match; it is actually about rewriting history. The film makes the sporting event a myth of the nation;

thus, India's glory becomes self-earned, emotional, and as lasting as a myth—a strong freedom narrative presented through the language of sport and cinema.

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