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## Realism And Genre Blending: The Neo-Noir Aesthetic In The Films *NH10* And *Stolen*

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### Abstract

This study examines the contemporary Indian films *NH10* (2015) and *Stolen* (2023) as exemplars of neo-noir cinema that successfully blend realism with genre conventions to create a distinctly Indian cinematic aesthetic. Through comparative analysis of visual style, narrative structure, and thematic content, this research demonstrates how both films employ neo-noir elements—including moral ambiguity, urban decay, and anti-heroic protagonists—while incorporating realistic portrayals of Indian social issues. The paper argues that these films represent a significant evolution in Indian cinema, where genre blending serves not merely as stylistic experimentation but as a means of addressing contemporary socio-political concerns through cinematic language that resonates with both domestic and international audiences.

**Keywords:** Neo-noir, Indian cinema, genre blending, realism, cinematography, social commentary

### Introduction

The emergence of neo-noir as a significant cinematic movement in contemporary Indian film represents a fascinating convergence of classical Hollywood genre conventions with distinctly Indian narrative sensibilities and social realities <sup>[1][2]</sup>. Neo-noir, defined as a contemporary adaptation of 1940s and 1950s American film noir that retains core themes while updating visual elements and content for modern audiences, has found particular resonance in Indian cinema's evolving landscape <sup>[1][3]</sup>. This paper examines two exemplary works: Navdeep Singh's *NH10* (2015) and Karan Tejpal's *Stolen* (2023), both of which demonstrate sophisticated approaches to genre blending that merge neo-noir aesthetics with realistic portrayals of Indian social dynamics.

The significance of this study lies in understanding how contemporary Indian filmmakers utilize genre hybridization not merely as stylistic choice but as a deliberate strategy for engaging with complex social issues including honor killings, class privilege, and institutional corruption <sup>[4][5]</sup>. Both films represent a departure from

traditional Bollywood conventions while maintaining cultural specificity, creating what can be termed a distinctly Indian neo-noir aesthetic <sup>[6][7]</sup>.

## Literature Review

### Neo-Noir Theory and Characteristics

Neo-noir emerged as a distinct cinematic form characterized by its adaptation of classical film noir elements for contemporary contexts <sup>[2][3]</sup>. The genre maintains the moral ambiguity, anti-heroic protagonists, and atmospheric tension of its predecessors while incorporating modern visual techniques and thematic concerns <sup>[8][9]</sup>. Visual characteristics include low-key lighting, high contrast cinematography, and the strategic use of shadows to create psychological tension <sup>[2][10]</sup>.

The narrative structure of neo-noir frequently employs non-linear storytelling, complex character development, and morally ambiguous situations that blur traditional distinctions between protagonist and antagonist <sup>[3][11]</sup>. Contemporary neo-noir has evolved to address modern anxieties including urban alienation, media manipulation, and social inequality <sup>[8][12]</sup>.

### Indian Cinema and Genre Evolution

The development of contemporary Indian cinema has been marked by increasing experimentation with genre conventions and realistic storytelling techniques <sup>[7][6]</sup>. The emergence of what scholars term "New Hindi Cinema" in the early 2000s coincided with India's neoliberal economic reforms and reflected urban anxieties through darker, more complex narratives <sup>[13][6]</sup>. This movement has produced filmmakers like Anurag Kashyap and Navdeep Singh, who have pioneered the adaptation of international genre conventions to Indian contexts <sup>[6][13]</sup>.

The integration of realistic elements with genre filmmaking represents a significant departure from traditional Indian cinema's emphasis on escapist entertainment <sup>[7][14]</sup>. Contemporary Indian directors have increasingly embraced what can be termed "dirty realism," incorporating documentary-style techniques and social commentary into genre frameworks <sup>[13][15]</sup>.

## Methodology

This comparative analysis employs textual analysis methodologies drawn from film studies, examining both films through the lens of genre theory, visual analysis, and thematic interpretation. The study focuses on three primary areas: visual aesthetics and cinematographic techniques, narrative structure and character development, and thematic content related to social realism. Primary sources include the films themselves, supplemented by director interviews, critical reviews, and scholarly analyses of contemporary Indian cinema.

## Visual Aesthetics and Neo-Noir Elements

### NH10: Highway to Darkness

NH10 demonstrates sophisticated employment of neo-noir visual techniques, particularly in its use of low-key lighting and stark cinematography <sup>[16][17]</sup>. Director Navdeep Singh, known for his earlier neo-noir work *Manorama Six Feet Under*, crafts a visual language that emphasizes the moral darkness underlying seemingly civilized society <sup>[18][19]</sup>. The film's cinematography employs high contrast lighting ratios that create deep shadows and dramatic silhouettes, particularly during the nighttime sequences that comprise much of the narrative <sup>[17][10]</sup>.

The highway setting itself functions as a liminal space between urban civilization and rural lawlessness, a classic noir motif adapted to Indian geographical and social contexts <sup>[4][20]</sup>. The visual progression from the brightly lit urban environments of Gurgaon to the increasingly dark and threatening rural landscapes mirrors the protagonists' descent into moral complexity <sup>[16][19]</sup>.

### Stolen: Urban Anxiety and Visual Tension

*Stolen* employs a more contemporary approach to neo-noir aesthetics, utilizing digital cinematography to create what critics describe as "cinematically stylized yet terrifyingly real" imagery <sup>[21][5]</sup>. The film's visual strategy emphasizes claustrophobic framing and minimal lighting to create a sense of isolation and vulnerability <sup>[21][22]</sup>. Director Karan Tejpal's background in commercial filmmaking brings a polished visual approach that nonetheless maintains the genre's characteristic emphasis on moral ambiguity and psychological tension <sup>[23][5]</sup>.

The railway station setting that opens the film establishes the neo-noir atmosphere through its combination of artificial lighting, crowd anonymity, and the inherent transience of the location <sup>[24][5]</sup>. The cinematography captures what one reviewer describes as "the intensity and suffocation" of the protagonists' situation through tight framing and unstable camera movements <sup>[22][21]</sup>.

## Genre Blending and Narrative Structure

### Hybrid Genre Conventions

Both films demonstrate sophisticated approaches to genre blending that extend beyond simple stylistic pastiche <sup>[25][16]</sup>. NH10 combines elements of road movies, crime dramas, chase thrillers, and revenge narratives while maintaining a neo-noir foundation <sup>[16][18]</sup>. This hybrid approach allows the film to address multiple thematic concerns while maintaining narrative coherence and visual consistency.

*Stolen* similarly blends survival thriller elements with social drama and crime narrative, creating what critics describe as a "gripping action thriller" that maintains focus on character development and social commentary

<sup>[26][5]</sup>. The film's 90-minute runtime demonstrates the efficiency possible when genre conventions are employed to support rather than dominate narrative content <sup>[21][5]</sup>.

## Moral Ambiguity and Character Development

The protagonists in both films exemplify the neo-noir tradition of morally complex characters who defy simple categorization <sup>[21][8]</sup>. NH10's Meera transforms from privileged urbanite to avenging anti-hero, embodying what scholars identify as the "female noir" tradition that subverts traditional gender roles within the genre <sup>[27][28]</sup>. Her character arc demonstrates the neo-noir emphasis on psychological transformation under extreme circumstances <sup>[29][30]</sup>.

Stolen's Gautam represents the contemporary neo-noir anti-hero who begins as an apathetic privileged individual but undergoes forced moral reckoning <sup>[22][21]</sup>. The film's exploration of class consciousness and social responsibility reflects neo-noir's capacity for social commentary through genre conventions <sup>[31][5]</sup>.

## Realism and Social Commentary

### Contemporary Social Issues and Genre Framework

Both films utilize neo-noir conventions to address pressing contemporary Indian social issues <sup>[29][21]</sup>. NH10's engagement with honor killing and patriarchal violence demonstrates how genre filmmaking can effectively address serious social problems without sacrificing entertainment value <sup>[20][32]</sup>. The film's realistic portrayal of rural Haryana's social dynamics provides authentic context for its thriller elements <sup>[4][19]</sup>.

Stolen's examination of class privilege, mob mentality, and institutional corruption reflects contemporary anxieties about social media misinformation and urban-rural divides <sup>[21][31]</sup>. The film's realistic treatment of these issues within a thriller framework demonstrates the potential for genre blending to create both entertainment and social commentary <sup>[5][33]</sup>.

## Urban-Rural Dynamics and Cultural Commentary

Both films explore the tension between urban modernity and rural traditionalism that characterizes contemporary Indian society <sup>[14][7]</sup>. NH10's highway setting serves as a literal and metaphorical space between these worlds, while Stolen's railway station represents a similar liminal space where different social classes intersect <sup>[4][24]</sup>. This geographic and social positioning allows both films to examine cultural conflicts through the lens of genre conventions.

The realistic portrayal of institutional corruption and social inequality in both films reflects broader trends in contemporary Indian cinema toward more critical social engagement <sup>[7][15]</sup>. The films' success demonstrates audiences' appetite for entertainment that also provides meaningful social commentary <sup>[21][30]</sup>.

## The Indian Neo-Noir Aesthetic

The analysis reveals that both *NH10* and *Stolen* have contributed to the development of a distinctly Indian neo-noir aesthetic that successfully integrates international genre conventions with local social realities <sup>[6][13]</sup>. This aesthetic is characterized by several key elements: the use of transitional spaces (highways, railway stations) as settings for moral transformation; the employment of classical noir visual techniques adapted to Indian lighting conditions and architectural contexts; and the integration of contemporary social issues into genre narratives.

The success of both films suggests that genre blending serves multiple functions in contemporary Indian cinema: it provides familiar narrative frameworks that can accommodate complex social commentary; it creates visual languages that can communicate effectively with both domestic and international audiences; and it allows filmmakers to address serious topics while maintaining commercial viability <sup>[25][7]</sup>.

## Implications for Contemporary Indian Cinema

The neo-noir aesthetic demonstrated by these films represents a significant evolution in Indian cinema's approach to genre filmmaking <sup>[6][15]</sup>. Rather than simply adapting Western genre conventions, both directors have created hybrid forms that maintain cultural specificity while employing internationally recognized cinematic languages <sup>[34][7]</sup>. This approach suggests a maturation in Indian cinema's relationship with global film culture that maintains artistic integrity while expanding audience reach.

The films' treatment of female protagonists also contributes to evolving representations of women in Indian cinema <sup>[28][29]</sup>. *NH10*'s female-centered narrative and *Stolen*'s complex portrayal of maternal loss both demonstrate how neo-noir conventions can be adapted to address gender issues within Indian social contexts <sup>[32][5]</sup>.

## Technical and Artistic Achievements

Both films demonstrate technical proficiency in cinematography, editing, and sound design that matches international standards while serving distinctly Indian narrative purposes <sup>[16][35]</sup>. The visual sophistication of both works suggests that contemporary Indian filmmakers have successfully integrated advanced digital filmmaking techniques with traditional storytelling approaches <sup>[5][35]</sup>.

The success of these films also indicates that Indian audiences are receptive to more complex narrative forms and darker thematic content than traditional commercial cinema typically provides <sup>[21][15]</sup>. This reception suggests possibilities for continued experimentation with genre forms and realistic content in Indian cinema.

## Conclusion

NH10 and Stolen represent significant achievements in contemporary Indian cinema's engagement with genre blending and realistic social commentary. Both films successfully demonstrate how neo-noir conventions can be adapted to Indian contexts while maintaining the genre's essential characteristics of moral ambiguity, visual sophistication, and psychological complexity. The films' integration of realistic social issues with genre entertainment suggests a model for contemporary cinema that can address serious topics while maintaining commercial viability.

The distinctly Indian neo-noir aesthetic demonstrated by these films offers insights into broader trends in contemporary world cinema, where local filmmaking traditions increasingly engage with international genre conventions while maintaining cultural specificity. The success of both films indicates that audiences are receptive to more complex and challenging forms of entertainment that combine visual sophistication with meaningful social commentary.

This analysis suggests several directions for future research, including comparative studies of neo-noir elements in other regional Indian cinemas, examination of audience reception patterns for genre-blending films, and investigation of how digital filmmaking technologies are influencing genre evolution in Indian cinema. The continued development of this aesthetic tradition will likely play a significant role in Indian cinema's ongoing evolution as both a domestic entertainment industry and a global cultural force.

The films examined in this study demonstrate that the most successful contemporary Indian cinema emerges not from simple imitation of international models but from creative synthesis of global genre conventions with local cultural content and social concerns. This approach offers a model for cultural production that maintains artistic integrity while engaging with international film culture, suggesting possibilities for continued innovation in Indian cinema's approach to genre filmmaking and social commentary.

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