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Abstract

This is a film review of *Hotel Mumbai* (2018), directed by Anthony Maras.



***Hotel Mumbai* (2018), directed by Anthony Maras**

This film is a recreation of violent and unthinkable events that happened at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in 2008 in the city of Mumbai (also known as Bombay), India. Ten terrorists entered the city and, through preplanned and coordinated attacks, brought horrific death and destruction. In total, 173 people were killed and 308 injured throughout the city. In a deliberate attempt to leave a message, important heritage sites were also deliberately targeted and damaged. Mumbai is considered to be the wealthiest city of India and seen often as its financial capital. The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel is a monument to luxury and high class living and is seen as “a symbol of Indian wealth and progress.”¹ From a North American perspective, the message behind the attacks in Mumbai appears to parallel the message behind the attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 9/11: attacking the symbols of power and wealth and pride in a society that is at odds

¹ Peter Foster, *The Telegraph*, Nov 27, 2008
(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/3529804/Bombay-terror-attacks-Why-the-Taj-Mahal-Hotel-was-chosen.html>)

with that advocated by the terrorists. What is interesting about the presentation of the hotel staff's and patrons' responses to the attack is a clear intent to show how people of different ethnicity and class and religious backgrounds show courage and attempt to work together to save more than just themselves. There were many scenes and moments when individuals risked their own lives to help others. So, the film stands as a tribute to human courage in the face of extreme violence and the likelihood of death. However, on a different level and from a particular religious perspective there is a fascinating ambiguity in what stands as the ultimate message of the film about the subject of religion and its role in human activity. At times there seems to be a message of the futility of religion and how it is the ultimate cause of what "evil" unfolds; but there are some moments that suggest the power of religion to "save." I think the film serves as a great opportunity to allow the viewer to decide.

The film opens with sweeping water scene and then two boats, each transporting five of the ten young men who will very soon afterwards initiate a killing spree. All of them are constantly listening through earplugs on phones to a voice later identified as Brother Bull, who is encouraging them with Jihadist rhetoric about how noble their cause is. We overhear "God is with you" as the earliest reference to religion in the film. We move back and forth between the activities of terrorists and some of the key characters who play significant roles during the hotel attack. If one pays attention to what is said or shown in the background, one learns that they are from various religious backgrounds. With at least a Sikh, a Hindu, a Muslim and a Christian represented, the film shows how they come together to help each other.

One important scene is when a group of hotel guests and servants are hiding in a room to evade the terrorists and an older woman, clearly a rich and privileged guest, is scared by one of the servants, a Sikh, because of his turban which she mistakenly believes makes him a Muslim.

The servant talks to her in a very kind way, explaining why he wears a turban and that it is extremely important to him but that, if it would make her feel better, he would take it off. The woman allows him to keep it on. Later, while attempting to escort a wounded guest secretly out of the hotel, the same Sikh readily takes his turban off to wrap around the woman to prevent blood loss. So, it is clear, his care for others supersedes any particular demands of his faith. A curious juxtaposition of this character is the development of one of the terrorists to more than just a simple terrorist. We return to him again and again in the film. Early on he shows concern that his parents will receive financial remuneration from what he has volunteered to do in Mumbai. Later on, he is told to check a female that would involve touching her breast, and he refuses initially but is told by the voice on the phone that God allows it—which starts to confuse him about his mission. So here is this contrast between two males who break from religious practice and belief: one to try to save a life and one to try to take as many lives as possible.

There are some comments made at key points in the film that follow a particular religious thread. When one guest implores another guest to pray he replies, “It’s prayers that started this shit.” And then, much later, several guests are held captive by terrorists (including the now slightly conflicted terrorist) and the terrorists are told to kill them all. After all but one are executed, the last woman—who happens to also be Muslim, but dressed in a very modern way and married to a non-Muslim who was just executed in front of her—begins to pray out loud looking the terrorist in his eyes. The terrorist demands that she stop praying and that she stop looking at him. She continues and, even though he has the gun pressed to her head, he cannot shoot her. He runs off. So, ironically, the least faithful Muslim in the room lives. Does prayer save her, or does looking in the eyes of her potential executioner while saying religious words that are significant to *him* save her? One wonders how to interpret the scene.

Another interesting juxtaposition is the obvious hope of the terrorists that their actions will guarantee their next life in paradise once they die. It becomes obvious that all of the men knew their mission was going to end in their death. The voice on the phone commands them, “Go do jihad!” and later, “Allah awaits.” The hotel they have come to seeking paradise, is itself an earthly paradise. It is beautifully ornate and extremely rich looking. The staff perform whatever it takes to make all the patrons enjoy their visits. To help the viewer not miss the obvious, one of the characters actually voices that the hotel “looks like paradise.”

At the end of the film, the survivors are seen clearly in all their humanity. The Sikh, now turban-less and barefoot, walks up to his Muslim employer and they embrace. At a press conference for the actors and creative staff right after the TIFF showing it was remarked that this film is an “anthem of resistance” and no doubt it is. But it also is a look at how religion lies at the heart of human drama, for good and for bad.