

ISSN 2231-198X

Writers Editors Critics (WEC)

Estd. March 2011

An International Refereed Biannual Journal
of English Language and Literature Published in March and September

Volume 12 • Number 1 • March 2022

Abstracted and Indexed by Literary Reference Centre Plus -
EBSCO HOST, USA for Worldwide Reference

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Published by
Guild of Indian English Writers, Editors and Critics (GIEWEC)
Reg. No. I – 194/2010, XXI/439, Thodupuzha East, Kerala, India – 685585
Email: prof.kvdominic@gmail.com, Web Site: www.writerseditorscriticsjournal.com,
www.giewecindia.com

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Cricket, Community and the Cohesive Nation: Examining the Celluloid Vision of *Lagaan*

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Abstract

It strikes one as quite an amazing coincidence that the year India's famed blockbuster *Lagaan* turned twenty, the Indian cricket team re-created a historic *Lagaan*-moment against Australia at Brisbane. Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (2001) which won the Audience Award at the 2001 Locarno Film Festival and had the rare distinction of being nominated in the Best Foreign Film Category for the 2001 Academy Awards, explored a subject that straightaway won over the Indian heart – a heroic anti-colonial revolt enacted on the terrain of that much-loved Indian sport, cricket. Weaving fact with fiction, myth with history, and picturesque song-dance sequences with a gripping theme, the movie went on to become not just a commercial blockbuster but also garnered sincere academic and critical praise from several quarters that appreciated the film for its postcolonial activism, its subaltern politics, and its attempt at re-discovering a forgotten history in the chapter of Indian cricket. What, however, makes for *Lagaan*'s lasting value in the cultural history of Hindi cinema is, one feels, its attempt at recasting the national past through an inclusive model of nationalism. Set in the princely state of Awadh in the year 1893, the sub-title of the film 'Once upon a time in India', clearly indicates a narrative desire to script in public memory an ideal, even if perhaps imagined, pre-colonial past where irrational social divisions were humanely and non-violently conquered and an inclusive