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The Critical Context of Films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee: The Nuanced Complexity of the Middle Path

Naukri- Estranged spirits from the days before the independnce of India

The main objective of the paper is not only to contribute the homage to Hrishikesh Mukherjee, but also it will suppose to critically depict some kind of objective readings of his films, rather than to contain tales of experiences and blood and flesh relations with Hrishikesh Mukherjee, where the image of the artist gets to relive with a renewal of love and affection within the minds of his connoisseurs. The objectivity may demand certain kind of analysis, formulation, diachronic readings which at times may look little remote from the directness of the pleasure of viewing and appreciating his films up front. The cultural artefacts which are hugely popular in their mass appeal, often brings the aspect of similar discomfort when subjected for academic scrutiny. For example, many of us here, may find an academic proposal quite unnecessary, if there is an effort made to analyze the voice quality of Lata Mangeshkar vis-a-vis the notions of Theodore Adorno, about the vanishing quality of the recorded female voice, within the paradigm of media theory of Frankfurt School. The cause

for disenchantment towards academics in India is not unfounded, so far the role of the academics and intellegentsia within the paradigm of independent India is far less than what it should have been and some traces of gradual moral irrelevance of Indian middle class can be found by suggestive means in some of the seminal films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee.

Not many critical works are found on Hrishikesh Mukherjee's works in Indian film academia, one among them, is Ideology of Hindi Film by Madhava Prasad. While delineating 'Middle-Class Cinema', he observed several sub-themes to be reiterated in several fims by Hrishikesh Mukherjee and some of his contemporaries in seventies. Prasad mentions this upcoming middle-class cinema was mostly about urban high caste middle class. Three sets of narrative articulation of this segment of middle-class cinema that he highlighted are as follows – one, middle class character as a 'martyr' 'to resolve' the so far unresolvable conflict, as in Anand and Namak Haram. I

may add here Satyakam as well; two, anxiety of the middle class patriarchy to contain the desire of the female within its endogamous structure, for example Guddi; three, anxiety of a middle class couple after the marriage to maintain the fertile conjugality, while sustaining the pressure of differing familial values, individual aspirations, and a mediatized notion of career, as in Abhimaan. In all these analysis often the thematic are shown to be some kind of compromise, while the contradiction of social reality is addressed only partially, as far as Prasad's views are concerned. Indian Film Studies, generally an offshoot of Cultural Studies model, often use films as a site for scrutiny of the inner dynamics of society and network of desires of various classes and castes. While its sociological significance has undoubted credentials, somehow there is an implicit notion to see films as artefacts primarily born out of social processes and historicity of times. Somewhere in this discourse the effort of the artist-individual is lost. The effort taken by Francois Truffaut to establish Hitchcock as an 'auteur', within the so-called rigid Hollywood studio system is indicative of other kind of film scholarship which is sadly not so prevalent in India. In that case the discourse is opened manily through the textual study of the cinematic articulation itself.

To understand Hrishikesh Mukherjee one needs to comprehend the dynamics of Indian Studio systems like The New Theatres. Though there might be outward similarity in terms of structure between a Hollywood studio and an Indian studio, there was also a key distinction. When Hollywood studios gave rise to several modern genres, like Western, Comedy, Social Drama etc, Indian studio systems like New Theatres and Prabhat gave birth to certain genres which were in continuation with the pre-cinematic, indigenous folk and ballad forms. Some of those can be seen as a continuation of civilizational lessons, collected through centuries. For example, the rise of the saint-poet genre films in the beginning

of talkie era can be mentioned, significantly in New Theatres and Prabhat, through the films like Chandidas, Vidyapati, Sant Tukaram, Sant Dnyaneshwar etc. These genres are extremely culture-specific and enjoyed a larger consensus from the society. In an Indian studio a person of whichever department and whichever rank was always part of that larger consensus, about the choice of thematics, which may not be happening in the similar ways in the Hollywood studios. Bimal Roy, starting as a camera assistant, Tapan Sinha as a sound assistant and Hrishikesh Mukherjee as lab assistant, not only learnt the craft but ethos of this kind of filmmaking as well. While honouring the individuality of the artist there is always a possibility to have a space for the opinion of the other and cinema being a collective art form – those can be seen as the greatest learnings which these filmmakers continued practicing even beyond the prime days of Indian studios.
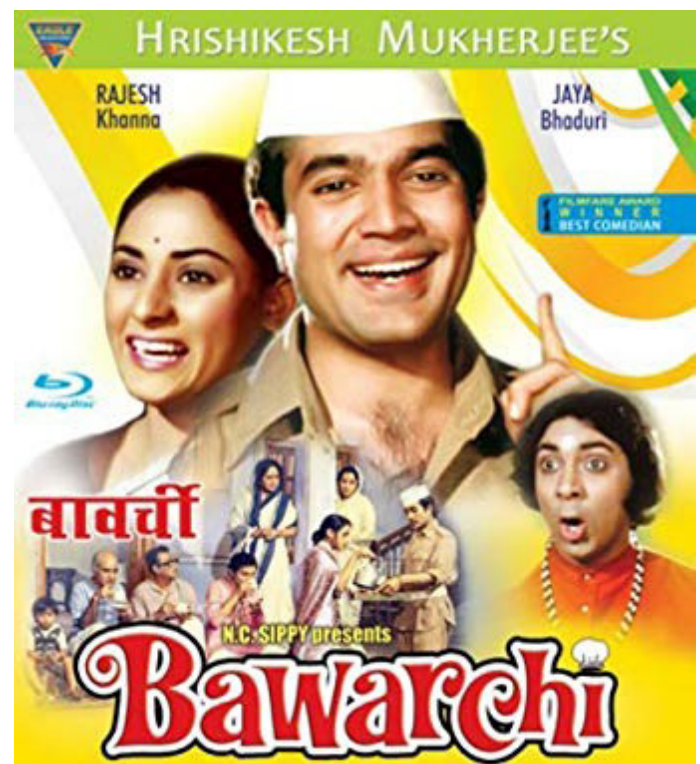
In an interview, available online, Hrishikesh Mukherjee more than once mentioned the fact how Bimal Roy was a father figure for him and how all the technicians who were working for him, including Hrishikesh Mukherjee

were part of the extended family. So it is not surprising that in the narratives of his films, one can find the renewed definition of family within the scope of modernity, which often can accomodate others beyond the blood relationship, within a familial structure. Possibly the greatest example of this would be Mem-didi (1961). It is interesting to note that this film, so early in his career, was made completely out of character artists, without any idea of star at all in the film. People living in a mohalla are integrating themselves through an imaginary network of familial relations. The difference of caste, class, religion, education – every possible markers of social inequality is getting resolved by extending the virtual family. No doubt the notion of family works here as a central metaphor, around which all the emotional transactions are mapped. For the first time we witness here a curious duet between between a teenage girl and a dog, can be seen as an extension of the idea of family.

Anuradha- The moment of revelation of the household chores in the process of being worthy citizens of modernity

It is interesting to note that when the narrative is primarily about the crisis of family and the individuals constituting the conjugal unit, there Hrishikeh Mukherjee reaches the narrative resolution by shifting the scale from the individuals in the family to the individuals as responsible citizens within a newly formed sovereign nation, where the idea of family becomes a successful mediator between the personal space and the collective responsibilities of nation. In the film Anuradha (1960) we have found the personal space is politicised as a narrative denouement. The shift of scale happens almost unwarranted for the audience.

Isn't it interesting to see the narratolgical ploy of the use of the thematic of family very differently in Anuradha and Mem-didi, made back to back! It was only the second decade after the independence. There were lot of doubts in the air about the nature of independence and the prospect of success of the newly formed nation. During independence he was a youth of mid-20s. He witnessed the steep price that had to be paid for the independence. No doubt his response was anxiety-driven, yet positive, as observable in these films.

On the films of Satyajit Ray, Andrew Robinson has mentioned to see Ray's works as a study of the development of middle-class in India within the specific context of Bengal, its aspiration towards modernity denying the village-bound unsustainable production relations. But the struggling journey of the middle-class to modernity was subsequently followed by enthusiasm, complacency, arrogance, degenaration and corruption – the trajectory of almost one century is very clear in Ray's films. Similarly Hrishikesh Mukherjee's preoccupation with middle-class can be located within three coordinates – individual's relation to family, individual's role as citizen in post-independent nation and shifting coordinates between family and nation. Over the years his position vis-a vis these coordinates did not remain static. To have dialogue between all thes coordinates, he initially set up the narrative context of the individual and family, or individual and nation (as in Satyakam, 1969), and invoked the third coordinate, either the nation or the family through the suggestion of the symbolic. In the end of Satyakam, the issue of the continuation of family is suggested while there was foregrounding of the crisis of the relation between an individual and his ideal role being a citizen. But we would like to reach to his under-acknowledged film Naukri (1978), a film having unlikely dark irony from a director who is mostly known as serving most deliciously palatable emotions. Mostly as an allegory, two spirits move from space to space,

at a time just prior to independence and show the horrors of the time, affecting the individual, the family, and the nascent aspiration of independent nationhood. Here suddenly emphasis is brought back to the the indifference of the individual restricted within the confinement of the narraow interest of the family. Indifference of individual is suggested as the core corruptive force, that may even threaten the existence of the nation.

It is in 70s, Hrishikesh Mukherjee found his own language of cinematic articulation.

Memdidi- Duet between the dog and the girl in an extended familial space

Through out 60s he was working within the already established language by Bimal Roy and great cinematographical resources of black and white era. Colour films introduced new set of aesthetic challenges to most of the serious practitioners world wide. The grandiose sets of black and white era coupled with patterns created by direct lights and high contrasts suddenly seemed to loose their appeal. The way the grayscale could integrate the variations of tonality and texture within those sets was not possible in colour. The artficiality of the set would have been pronounced by colour. In fact if we pay attention to Hrishikesh Mukherjee's seed idea for his first film Musafir (1957), the graffiti done by the earlier series of tenants on the real wall, we may feel his impulse towards the reality of space and things. While he had to continue to work within studio-space within artificial sets, there seems to be an acknowledgment of the materiality of that set as well. We see the set and art direction of middle class houses in his films in 70s gradually becoming bereft of embellishments. As the artificiality of those sets

are visible, there seems to be a concern about the sadness associated with these sets. That gets brilliantly manifested in one sequence of Guddi (1971), where the star actor shows the dilapidated framework of the erstwhile famous studio to Guddi and her fiance. Interestingly that sequence can be seen as a directorial interjection, almost having a quality of soliloqui, not affecting the characters with any pronounced sense of significance.

Though seemingly restricted by the artificiality of sets, he got engaged in developing a language from material objects, which are real in their existence. The real objects can assume a suggestive-emotive quality, as his editorial instinct could show. In the end of Anand (1970), while the young doctor breaks down with a recognisable melodramtic gesture on the dead-body of Anand, the heightened emotional tone is ruptured by the material language of a 1/4" magnetic sound recorder. The slow movement of the last bit of tape winding away to the spool and the fast movement of the spool full with tape assume symbolic significance vis a vis the end of life and the eternal life thereafter. This language of materiality provided him the magic coin where there is real on one side and symbol/simile/metaphor on the other side. This he could achieve so effortlessly due to his close relation with Indian and Bengali literature and on the other hand a keen sense of the materiality of the objects.

It is also a very significant objective of the present study to reveal the practical and theoretical insights of Mukherjee's films which could be added an artistic worldview and a formal articulation in the language of his enormous creation. As a creators maestro, Hrishikesh Mukherjee incorporated a few formal devices what he found as essentials for his filmmaking.

Some of the issues those can be probed, not necessarily within the span of just this paper, can be as follows:
One, generally representation film sequence

based on realism and melodrama, seem to be contradictory in nature. It is possible to conceive that for Hrishikesh Mukherjee these two principles became like two ends of the spectrum of representation, where he could choose a well-calibrated amalgamation of both, depending on the dramatic/cinematic necessity. This is quite difficult to achieve, as those are percieved as two separate registers.
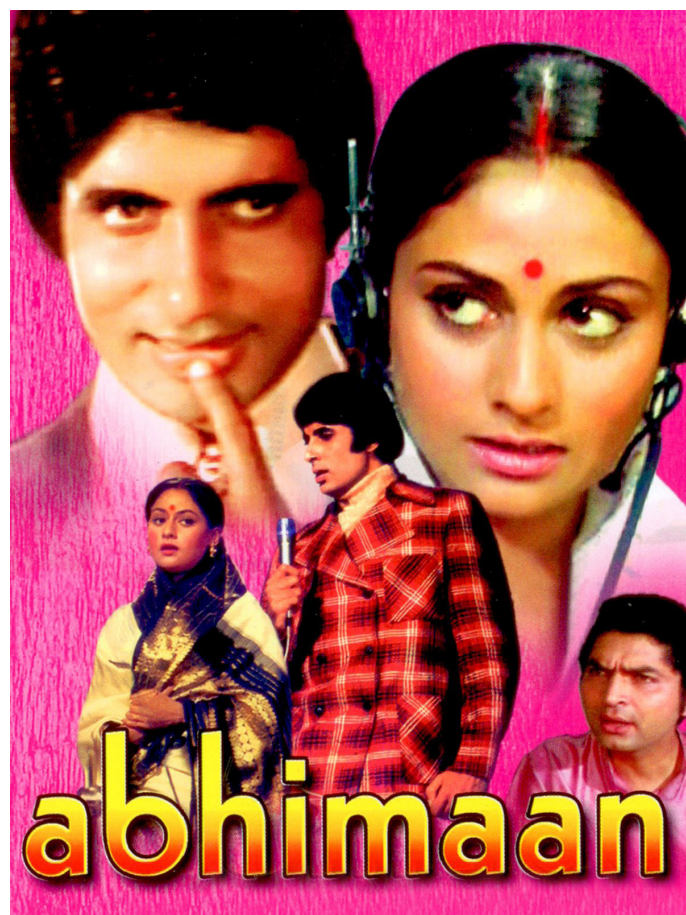
Two, within the story space of real characters and real events, it seems at times Hrishikesh Mukherjee introduces characters as embodiments of ideas. Hence, a formal exploration starts as the dialogue and transaction between realist signs and symbolic signs as seen in these films, Anupama, Satyakam, Anand, Bawarchi, Golmal etc. In terms of characterisation, he could take liberty from the melodramatic register. In writings as early as by Sharatchandra, one can locate at times planting of a character, who have their strong habits of thinking and reactions, coloured by a tint of eccentricity. By using those characters at times as tropes, Sharatchandra could convey many ideas, which were otherwise difficult to generate within the more stable characters tied by the conventions of the society. We see similar strategies at work in some of his best works.

Three, in some of the mise-en-scene elements of some of the sequences, one can find a decisive characteristic bent towards symbolic. While there is a plausible realist cause always loosely prompted, it can be shown that those moments of symbolic departure, within the otherwise realist framework are often like the creative flourishes that the director might have enjoyed. For example, the archeological site in Guddi, the kites in Namak Haram, the bunch of balloons in Anand etc.

Four, one also needs to pay attention to the qualitative shift that he brings to the films which were inspired by earlier films made by other directors, specially in Bengal. For example, Galpa Haleo Satyi by Tapan Sinha to Bawarchi; and Chhadmabeshi by Agradoot [a director's collective] to Chupke Chupke. In Galpa Haleo Satyi by Tapan Sinha, the issue

of breaking down of an urban middle class joint family due to socio-economic reasons is averted by a fantasy coordinated within realism. When Hrishikesh Mukherjee adapts the same theme in Hindi, in Bawarchi, we see a symbolic transfer. Now the joint family is more of a symbol of nation itself. Within the similar story structure, along with the introduction of the recognizable melodramatic elements, there are set pieces of musically structured conversation, regarding Hindi and Urdu. The concern of upper catse, urban, Bengali, middle class joint family, goes through a paradigm shift in its narrative connotation as it is made in Hindi.

Lastly lets investigate the middle-road cinema as it is often used in the context of Hri-

shikesh Mukherjee. I would like to differentiate between 'middle-class cinema' as said by Madhava Prasad with its ideological import, mentioned earlier and 'middle-road cinema'. Middle-road cinema of India remains till date less of a critical term than of a loosely coined film-historical term. The term 'middle' assumes two poles around it, one, the 'main-

stream' industrial cinema and the other being the 'art cinema'. Art cinema seems to embrace the ethos of artistic modernism, while the industrial cinema seems to uphold the traditional value systems and the popular imagination of a post-colonial reality within the framework of melodrama induced by modernity. By another mode of formal simplification the total spectrum assumes politics and aesthetics of right (industrial cinema) to that of left (art cinema). While making these simplified schematic models are bound to raise questions, it may offer us a more nuanced way to approach the 'middle-road cinema'.

Whether the middle position is being approached from the left margin or from the right, based on that a critical distinction within that middle path can be arrived at. For example filmmakers like Shyam Benegal's arrival at middle path happens from the left. The negotiation shows the retention of left as the content of the narrative while remaining not so proactive about the formal inquiries of cinematic language, a necessary aspect of artistic modernism. The narrative content questions the social fabric at a poltical level and hopes for the 'revolutionary' change of the social reality, while in terrms of cinematic form it mostly relies on representational realist regis-

ter. On the other hand, in films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee, the middle position is assumed within the industry production system and the movement tends to be towards left from the right, alongwith a revision of industrial codes of presentation, which offers new codes of cinematic presentation, new kinds of cinematic objects. With the significant change of the site of the narrative, from the assumed social fabric, mostly seen in the industrial cinema in terms of family and community, we encounter an emerging urbanity of characters in films like Anand, Guddi, Chupke Chupke, Rang Birangi etc. For Hrishikesh Mukherjee this urbanity not necessarily comes as a painful or disturbing contrast to the idyllic and idealized village life. Here the characters are more at ease in the city, even at times without the hierarchy of family and community, to form urban and secular engagements within the human geography of the city.

As the conclusion of the paper, I would like to raise a question that whether the films of Hrishikesh Mukherjee show us an alternative path to arrive at secular modernity in South Asia without being overtly combative with the imagined tradition that somehow haunts all of us in different ways and different degrees while searching for our own idendity!

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