

Tribute

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Irrfan Khan: A Journey in Bollywood and Beyond



I first heard the name of Irrfan Khan in mid-1990s when I overheard my aunt and some of her guests talking over tea about the current Doordarshan television soaps amidst other sundry stuff. I could follow bits of it as I too was an eager watcher of some of these serials as a 10-12 year old school going kid. In the course of the conversation, they pointed out how the young guy was an impressive actor and seemed like he was in for the long haul. They were of course correct and the keen performer in question probably superseded the expectations of even his professional colleagues and seniors. The involved, calculated and increasingly well calibrated performer on the small screen gradually over time proved his mettle in diverse mediums and genres. He was increasingly seen more prominently across many soap operas and both mainstream and parallel Hindi film space. Following in the footsteps of stalwarts like Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri and Pankaj Kapoor, Irrfan was also a noteworthy presence in the increasingly dwindling number of art-house parallel films made in the 1990s and early 2000s. He had veritably announced his presence

loud and clear with the British Indian director Asif Kapadia's amazingly well produced period piece *The Warrior* (2001, his first foray into the crossover film). Prior to that in Tapan Sinha's haunting portrait of a maverick physician *Ek Doctor Ki Maut* (1990), Irrfan was notable in the performance of an intrepid journalist. However, it was with Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2003), a gangland saga with rich psychological conflicts echoing Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that Irrfan really broke out (the incredible cast included Pankaj Kapur, Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah) and announced the arrival of an outstanding actor. What struck one about his performances over the years, whether on television or on the film screen, was his natural yet composed movements and pointed sharp dialogue delivery.

This is not to suggest or say that all his performances were homogenous and without variety. Although Hindi commercial cinema did try to pigeonhole him into playing crooked cops, gangsters, villains and shady lawyers, he played them exceptionally well in many

a mediocre and less than mediocre films. In fact, depending on the fare which came his way, in the art/cross over/realm and the commercial zone, Irrfan was an actor who always looked in sync with the fictional universes created and realized on screen. His performative arsenal was honed in the haloed National School of Drama in Delhi where his sincerity and dedication was noted initially by theatre directors and



troupes. He was an unconventional looking man, with dusky skin tone, a lanky thin frame and big intense protruding eyes, which, it seemed was always on the lookout to make a point. His hold over Hindi was excellent, which, albeit sounded more like old Hindustani: a clean crisp Urdu influenced and inflected tongue which sounded more like music if one cared to listen (He even hosted and narrated a horror show called 'Mano Ya Na Mano' on the now defunct satellite channel Star One in 2006). Add to it, his earthy and tough sensibility helped him to ground his characters in a believable fashion. His profile and melancholic eyes, if one looks into it for some minutes, may remind one of a lost and lorn nobility (an aspect exploited wonderfully in Tigmanshu Dhulia's *Saheb, Biwi Aur Gangster Returns*, 2013). In fact, from his mother's side he had royal blood: his full name was Shehzada Irrfan Khan which he stopped using due to its feudal baggage. His was a voice of reason and equanimity which was for once prime-time fodder as he irked Islamic clerics by criticizing the practice of 'qurbaani' (sacrificing animals) and emphasized the need for self-introspection more than fasting during the holy month of Ramzan. Even the Mumbai film

magazine press sometimes tapped into his unconventional side by featuring interviews which asked him his views on life, marriage, relationships and of course films, which performed the task of giving these rag sheets a touch of gravitas and class amidst heaps of gossip, centre spreads and paid promotions.



With the settling in of the corporate finance and capital in Mumbai cinema in the first decade of the 2000s, production houses began to produce a variety of films made with interesting plots, characters and narratives. Writers and directors too arrived with fresh talent and energy who more or less challenged conventional ways of telling stories. Directors like Anurag Kashyap, Rajkumar Hirani, Vishal Bhardwaj and Zoya Akhtar and films like *Dev D* (2009), *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (20026) or *Rang De Basanti* (2006) created a space for innovative popular films and producers too were keen to tap into an ever growing urban middle class multiplex going public in cities and smaller towns. Irrfan was a god-send to this new field of energy created in a globalized Mumbai cinema. Time and again in his interviews in the press, he talked about how his central goal as a performer was to be part of great stories as his acceptance and popularity grew. His creative collaborations with directors like Vishal Bhardwaj, Tigmanshu Dhulia, Meghna Gulzar and Shoojit Sarkar produced a body of work which told slice of life and realistic stories without melodrama or kitsch. He was an affable presence in the romantic comedy *Piku* (2015), while in *Pan Singh*

Tomar (2010), he virtually power lifted the film by authentically portraying the life and times of a battered soldier-athlete turned dacoit. In *Talvar* (2015), he played the role of CBI officer Ashwini Kumar in his characteristic laconic style yet with a faithfulness and integrity close to real life criminal investigators.



In *The Lunchbox* (2013) which won accolades around the world, we see Irrfan the actor and artist at his meticulous best. He essayed the role of an accountant in Mumbai on verge of retirement so realistically that it is a lesson in method acting. It is revealing that he also co-produced the film apart from playing the male lead. It showed his range and vision as a performer and creator who never flinched from bringing out the humanity of the characters he played on screen. Even in a populist and pulp espionage thriller like *D-Day* (2013), Irrfan brought out the grease and pain of being a secret agent on foreign soil.

Bollywood superstar Shahrukh Khan's journey is a celebrated one which was India's first true successful switch story from the world of television to the world of cinema. He was already an impressive presence on Doordarshan which paved the way for his incredible arrival as a popular actor in Hindi cinema. But more than Shahrukh Khan, in a way, Irrfan was the true bridge between theatre, television, parallel cinema, Bollywood, cross-over/international and big budget Hollywood productions in India. Indeed, his story is

reflective of the exciting changes in Indian cinema in the last twenty five years in quite a few ways. He was not a big star like Shahrukh Khan who represented Bollywood globally, yet when it came to the real thing, i.e. acting, the best in the West and international cinema often in the recent times looked to Irrfan. It is again revealing of his aesthetic politics as an actor that he wanted to and worked with auteur directors of the caliber of a Mira Nair (*The Namesake*, 2006) and an Ang Lee (*Life of Pi*, 2012). It was proof of his growing respect as an artist that a Hollywood director of the stature of Christopher Nolan wanted to work with him, although it did not come to fruition. It was only a matter of time before the doors of mainstream Hollywood opened for him with noted roles in lavish superhero and fantasy fare like *The Amazing Spiderman* (2012) and *Jurassic World* (2015). Irrfan did not become a superstar like Shahrukh either in Bollywood or elsewhere. Yet he symbolized an internationalism of ambition and craft more than Shahrukh Khan and forever remained a dependable actor which ideally should be the only eligibility of being an actor.



A star is a capital value as well as a construct which has varied implications in film production and film reception (Dyer, 1980). Irrfan never became a Bollywood superstar yet one couldn't dismiss his increasing popularity and acceptability amongst the masses. Initially stereotyped only in intense roles, one saw his comic talent, probably, for the first time in Anurag Basu's bitter-sweet tale of love and longing in urban India, *Life in a...Metro* (2007). His comic timing was soon capitalized in other films too. It was a strange irony that in his late 40s (a phase in which stars usually gravitate towards more serious roles), he was playing whimsical and oddball romantic protag-

onists in mainstream Bollywood films like *Karwaan* (2018), *Piku* (2015) and *Qarib Qarib Singlle* (2017). It was an aspect of his power as a performer which was exploited by the advertisement world too where they often used his ability to say a lot in just a few words. So, we can say, he had become a star in the precise sense of the word in the last few years since capital was carefully put behind him in projects where he was required to give a certain kind of act. Bollywood needed him and his rawness to give realism and credibility to many of their productions, and yet he maintained his individual dignity and distinctiveness as only a self-respecting artist could.



Film scholar Barry King distinguishes between two kinds of star performances: personification and impersonation (King, 1985). Irfan personified the common-man on screen and he could be someone who was at home in both urban and rural centred narratives. Increasingly, in the last few years, as his currency grew among the multiplex crowd, he could easily walk into the shoes of any one of this aspirational audience in the most disarming way. He was not a great believer of prosthetics or make-up as far as bringing his characters come alive on screen was concerned. On very few occasions, one saw him in eye-catching cosmetics, and those few occasions were the ones when the script and the character really demanded a certain get-up (e.g. in the Partition era film *Qissa* where he played a Sikh, 2013).

Irfan's strengths as an actor lay in his distinctive gestures, posture, gaze and intonations. Over the years, his on-screen persona had indeed registered a very intimate connection with the audience. So, one may say he was an actor who relied more on internalization

of the subtleties and features of the character played. His act as a crafty student leader in *Haasil* (2003) helped him develop a very strong following in the Hindi heartland, while his role as a Pakistani Police officer in the Hollywood film *A Mighty Heart* (2007, which chronicled the kidnapping and death of American journalist Daniel Pearl) got him noticed by an international audience and press. Danny Boyle was so impressed by his performative capabilities during the making of the Oscar winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008, where he again played a street smart Mumbai cop) that he gushed: '... he has an instinctive way of finding the "moral center" of any character' and compared him to an athlete who can execute the same move perfectly over and over (sakaltimes.com).



The word 'Irfan' (Arabic) suggests knowledge, awareness and learning. Irfan Khan was an actor who truly displayed all these qualities and his talent was a meeting ground of craft, instinct and method. Walter Benjamin in his celebrated essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' argued that the actor in the film medium doesn't have an aura as compared to theatre and there is a process of commodification involved to compensate for this lack. But this line of critique becomes weak in the case of an actor like Irfan who largely eluded this element of the culture industry to establish a continuous intimate dialogue with diverse groups of audience with his unique

aura. In the untimely death of him at the age of 53, Indian cinema has lost a gem of a performer. Vol. 26, No.5.

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