Article

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Realism and Indian Cinema: Different Upshots

Considering the development and demise of different types of concepts and movements throughout the history of the visual art, realism is no bolt from the blue. The typical realist movements came into being during the mid of the nineteenth century as a reaction to romanticism, and then, from Champfleury to Courbet and beyond that, it had been evolved in many different ways. Its primary aim was to depict the objects and as well as the experiences, both ordinary and extraordinary, of the coeval life accurately, and more importantly, close to reality, avoiding the hitherto artistic conventions and clichés. The basic idea of realism cancelled out any imaginative idealization in support of a close sighting of the outward appearances. It had become prevalent primarily in the modern European paintings and then slowly swayed the other branches of art.

Over the years, realism, with all its possible ramification and problems, has egressed as one of the most notable terms in the history of cinema and embraced many artistic currents from different countries. In this sense, realism is placed somewhere between the rules of classical cinema and the path breaking innovations of the avant-garde, where the visual language, through which it intends to captivate the audience, often encourages overt stylization and abstraction. Here, the main aim is to analyse how the aesthetic of realism has influenced the cinema of the subcontinent and produced different outcomes. In the course of doing so, let's look back on the two Indian films - '*Pratidwandi*' (1970), widely known as '*The Adversary*' by Satyajit Ray and '*Chalchitra*' (1981), not widely known as '*The Kaleidoscope*', made by Mrinal Sen, eleven years after the release of the former. We shall envisage the socio-political tenor of Ray and Sen's filmic interventions by canvassing these two particular films, which have several features in common, in the light of their much appreciation as a realistic breakthrough. Also, we try to explain how, sometimes, a steadfast acceptance of a few fixed notions of cinematic realism as an ontological analogue of social

factuality tends to end up in platitude, and no further creative breakthrough seems likely because of this kind of preoccupation.

Both the masters have developed their own abstract of realism, which would eventually impact their art, craft, and politics of cinema, in relation to their individual taste, education, and other influences that are too many - as for Ray it ranges from the literary realism of Bengal to classical Hollywood masterpieces, from Binodebehari Mukhopadhay to Italian neo-realism to mention a few, and, on the other hand, for Sen, who believes that cinema has the power to unbalance social stasis, it includes Rudolf Arnheim's essays, the French new wave cinemas, Augusto Boal's theatre, etc. It is needless to provide the list of influences that have constructed their cinematic idioms, however, what is important is that the conclusions they seem to draw out of all these things share a common ground, and, unlike Ritwik Ghatak, a lunar luminosity in the history of Indian cinema, whose style remains disparate with respect to his contemporaries, the mechanical reproduction of reality remains somewhat the primary focus for both of them. Moreover, both of them belong to a relatively similar social milieu, and, although their political ideology is different, so to speak, but their approach towards the art of filmmaking has advanced in an explicit relation to the material reality of the same city, Kolkata, in which they have grown up. Considering all the differences and similarities in terms of style and form, Ray's speciality can be defined as a masterful and discerning

retelling of a story, bridging the popular and the arcane, and stranding in his oeuvre with sheer fluidity and assertion, but Sen, thanks to his deviance, often shows the courage to put aesthetic strategy and stylization over the content, upending the conventional narrative expectations, and at the same time keeping the strong desire to seize the reality in flesh, which we often descry in Mani Kaul's work.

The two aforementioned films are centred around the city of Kolkata and its lower-middle class society. Although, within a gap of ten years, the metropolis has changed a lot - both politically and socially, however, the basic underlying structure of the middle-class society and the moral values remain, more or less, the same. In 'The Adversary', Ray, no doubt a fastidious filmmaker, wishes to capture the turbulent period of the early seventies, when the Naxalite movement was raging across the state, and the influx of the 'refugees' from Bangladesh was becoming a matter of serious concern, without taking a direct political stance. The hope for a change during the late seventies slowly died out, and the radical elements had been absorbed within the system very carefully by the then left front government. This process is almost completed by the early eighties, and the city dwellers have learnt how to cope with hopelessness and fatigue, forgetting all the previous unrests and discords. 'The Kaleidoscope' is a child of that inert and decaying time, and Sen focuses on

the private lives, which is complex but insignificant, of the lower-middle-class society of the city, making it a more politically interesting one. In both the films, the protagonists, young, educated, and unemployed, have shades of unflustered innocence and the untameable rebel inside, and the other characters are also wisely typified by the respective directors in order to express their personal understanding of the city and its changing dreams and reality. Although much effort is made over the years to figure out a comparative study only between the Calcutta Trilogies by both the masters, which is incontrovertible, but, as far as realism in cinema is concerned, the two aforementioned films exhibit two completely opposite ends of the spectrum despite having some features and tropes in common, which is exactly why it needs to be examined in detail.

'*The Adversary*' traces the struggle and helplessness of a young man, Siddhartha, a medical student who has to give up his studies due to his father's sudden expiration, who is caught betwixt and between. Amidst the intolerant political environment of Kolkata during the early seventies, when terror invisibly stalks the lanes and the streets, compounded with large-scale joblessness, Siddhartha feels down in the dump, however, the smartness with which he reacts and interacts with others will poke the viewers to think otherwise. Everywhere he goes, everybody he meets is becoming a matter of disgrace for him. Known villains are mathematically and stereotypically correct in their thinking and actions, not allowing him to ruminate on happiness and slowly pushing him towards nothingness. His brother is ready to dig his own grave for a greater cause, his sister makes no mistake to exploit her boss, his friends, careless and unbridled, are ready to go with the wind without thinking too much as the impalpable moments slip through the finger too quickly, and finally, the employers, who are ready to drown him in a quagmire from which there is absolutely no romantic way out. He keeps wandering about

the city every day, either looking for a job or to meet his friends or just without a cause. After a few days, in one evening he happens to meet a young lady who lives in his neighbourhood. The director dwells well on the despair seared across the face of Siddhartha with the close-ups and the mid shots. But the problems have appeared in its known forms, and the narrative follows the simple causality of action, sublating any chance of contemplation. From the very first scene, filmed in a photographic negative, the film entices the viewer to follow a particular path where each and every event would follow a particular sequence and must justify its verisimilitude in all possible manners, for example, when Siddhartha has been suddenly asked by a young lady, with whom he would gradually develop a relationship, to help her to fix the fuse, the latter tries to justify her action in her best possible effort. In one of the interview scenes, when a candidate asks that whether the language of the communication would be English, Siddhartha's reply in a hoity-toity manner outlines the obvious, thus not allowing any chance of imaginal interpolation. As the narrative moves on, we see that Siddhartha is slowly plunging into the morass in a very predictable manner.

The photographic space is constructed along the axis of an action that assumes everything takes place along a discernible and predictable line, and an unobtrusive style of cinematography that always struggles to prove the believability of the images, enforcing the viewers simply to accept the story, identity, and the place and arrive at a single truth that Siddhartha must combat his adversaries. A realist scenarisation and dramatization of the events ensures that although different in nature and magnitude, they will surely cohere in the most conventional and linear fashion within a narrative space, blurring the distance between the image from its referent.

The film is firmly anchored at every moment to an erect authorial stance guided by a unidimensional discernment of realism. The script

binds all the characters in a way it 'should be', and the characters will continue to react with good faith and intelligence, without surprising or disturbing or provoking you greatly. In a politically turbulent society, the 'personal' hardly becomes the 'political', remaining just a ploy of framing a complete story by assuming a social and intellectual unanimity - a book on Che Guevara can assure us the integrity of a rebel and label Siddhartha as an escapist - that fails to be a bell ringer. The answers are provided before the questions are raised. Ray's realistic approach towards filmmaking maintains the structure of communicative transparency and style never intends to invoke a new cinematic exploration of the human condition. The tendency towards the actual representation of the visual appearances of things suppress the interstices of the images, which ends up in depicting the reality as a set of self- evident themes only with which anybody can hardly differ. Once the film ends, the story ceases to proceed further into the mind of the viewers because of its definitive approach and stylization. The reality of art is not always what we encounter every day, and yet, they both should resemble each other and call for participation. '*The Adversary*' elides any scope of active participation or encourages you to investigate the images, all you need to do is yield to an overwhelming desire of a realist, and politically subdued, storytelling.

The renowned French filmmaker and theorist Jean Epstein once announced that, 'I want films in which not so much nothing as nothing very much happens'. '*The Kaleidoscope*' is a perfect example of that type of film. Here, Mrinal Sen strives to bear witness to the secular affairs of a section of the Bengali urban society of the early eighties, by which time the left politics was entrenched in West Bengal in transition, 'building in episodes and sort of disperses outside the membrane of events' (quoting Mani Kaul). The metropolis, Kolkata, was witness to too many problems at that point in time - from increasing population due to infiltration from the eastern region to conflicting interests of different business classes to industrialization. Apart from the Naxal episode, the setting of the film is, more or less, the same as '*The Adversary*'; however, the mode here is comedy, although it no longer looks like a comedy film. The time difference between these two is almost eleven years, but neither the overall situation nor the mindset of the people has changed much. A young and zestfully enthusiastic writer, Dipu, is asked to write an 'intimate story', based on real facts, by a highfalutin news editor. A good and saleable story may ensure his employment in that news agency. Therefore, Dipu decides to write on the existential malaises experienced by the people belonging to the same socio-economic milieu as he does. Groping for words, he starts off enthusiastically, but as time flows, it becomes clear to him that each and every situation has its own ramifications that are too wide and open to do by. He even blames his mother also at some point in time for non-cooperation, as she refuses to act according to his whims. Like '*The Adversary*', the two main characters of the film - Dipu and the city itself - become the two adversaries. He not only has to combat his adversaries but also manage and manipulate the stakeholders somehow to get the story done, making him see red. Here, the problems do not appear in its recognizable forms, and a mere reversal of the usual and obvious will not be of much help, which makes the investigation of Sen's aesthetic-political representation more interesting and challenging.

The film starts with a funny scene. Dipu is waiting for a bus, when suddenly a suited-booted man appears in front of him and invites him to come along with him, the reason behind this is best known to man only. Eventually they arrive at the latter's home and enter his small room. Then the man unceremoniously starts removing his clothes one by one, and this running event is narrated also by Dipu simultaneously with the action, a clear

indication to break the conventions of realism. After a while, we hear the tune of 'sargam' played on a harmonium, changing its tempo gradually from adagio to presto. Before that, we have already seen an old harmonium lying on the bed. 'Thus, the smart, urban, elite got naked...and turned poor' - the scene ends with these words. It creates a certain unsettling effect as it moves unsteadily back and forth between a public gaze and a private eye, and by exhibiting this kind of aesthetic rupture, Sen has clearly set the expectation from the very beginning that he will abstain from imposing meanings and encourage the personal freedom of the viewers. The mundane lives of the common people, irrespective of their shallowness and kindness, have become the body and the politics of the film. A young Dipu sometimes feels estranged, as even to catch a taxi in this city you need to have the courage of a rebel and the building in which he resides consists of many families, and each and every family has been struggling with their own problems that are unique. Within a narrow space, one's advantage becomes another's matter of concern and vice versa. Dipu tries to put his gaze as an outsider, however, willy-nilly he also has become one of the characters of the drama that occurs every day. The effective use of ocularisation reveals the amazing and unparallel relationship between the self-centred characters who, at every chance, are ready to malign each other and behave crassly but, at the same time, are ready to act quickly in case of any emergency, without even being asked.

Consciously abandoning the tendency to represent the events in its actuality, Sen asks us not to look only at what is visible, but how that is made visible as well by offering a unique insight into the lived experiences of individuals and human relationships in a city of umpteen conflicts. The materiality of his discursive style examines the situation via thorough attention to the objects, characters, and space. The coal stove used by Dipu's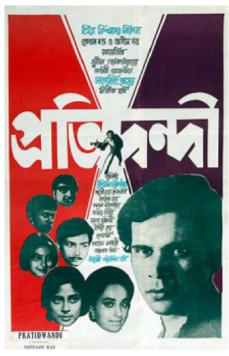 mother emits smoke, causing problems for those who live in the upper portion of that apartment, and therefore, the windows should be kept closed during the time of cooking. Dipu vehemently argues with his mother on this matter as the latter does not allow him to open the window to avoid being drawn into a quarrel with the neighbours; instead, she asks him to buy her a gas oven if he is so concerned about this matter. In the latter part of the film, a top shot, using a wide-angle lens, reveals that smoke comes out from every household of a big slum adjacent to Dipu's house, as all the coal ovens are functioning together at the same time. Dipu and his younger brother together are watching the scene from the terrace. Suddenly, the boy asks insouciantly: '*Brother, how many ovens are there in Kolkata*?' His brother quickly reacts to this and decides to start his story with this innocent question. He describes it as - '*A simple question with tremendous implications*. What does the image intend to signify? Is this an achievement by the left front government or does Dipu hail communism? We certainly are not sure, however, we will see towards the end of the film that the editor of that news agency, for which Dipu tries to construct a story, asks Dipu whether he is a communist. The same question is posed in '*The Adversary*' as well, so I wish to recall one particular scene from the film where Siddhartha and Keya stand on the rooftop of a multi-storied building, overlooking the cityscape. In the background, we get to hear political rhetoric coming out of the loudspeakers installed nearby, aiming to remind the viewers about the current political situation. This scene fails to evoke the intended emotion, and the usage of this kind of cut-and-dried reference reveals a certain poverty of representation only, however, on the other hand, the juxtaposition of nature and artifice in the image of the coal ovens emitting smoke in '*The Kaleidoscope*' reflects a formalist abstraction without conforming to any particular aesthetic standpoint, encouraging the possibility of the emergence of the real as a conflict between the orders of reality.

Looming on the border of fiction and reality, in this film Sen adopts a screenplay, which is free from any real independent significance and filled up with the extraneous detail of the daily lives of the common city dwellers. When the women of the building get involved into a quarrel, Dipu consciously distances himself and starts gazing at the entire event from different angles as an outsider. This estrangement effect allows the viewer a chance to look at the characters' performance from a critical distance, maintaining emotional distance from the characters. The intrigue of the image connects with Brechtian realism, which surprises the viewers, much as our own behaviour may cause us to feel wonder when confronted with some unexpected situations. The scene is made further compelling by using a score, something which will not necessarily fit into Ray's idea of realism in cinema. The music is employed here not to heighten the drama, but to communicate the situation and the impulses like a reporter, as if Dipu himself, as occurs in the epic theatres. Another important aspect of this film is the space. The filming of the space conjures up a field of vision born out of the chaotic flows of the objects and human gaze, providing the basic framework of subjective reality; and the characters do not move in a predictable manner throughout the frame, helping the audience to discover a different perspective in order to move beyond the contradictions. The use and alteration of spatial depictions in this film triggers a feeling of discomfort, reminding us Erwin Panofsky's idea of 'dynamization of space'.

 'I can speak in English' - reads a sign board hanging on a door beside a street. In front of it, a palmist continues his regular business, trying to deceive two foreigners by trickery when Dipu enters the frame unexpectedly. Recall the interview scene, already mentioned before, in '*The Adversary*' where a fellow candidate asks Siddhartha whether the mode of discussion and the interview is English. In both the films, the language 'English' is highlighted as a matter of concern in a postcolonial country like India, but in '*The Adversary*' Siddhartha seems to take pride in the fact that he can interact in English fluently, and therefore one step ahead of the other candidates who are not so good in English. However, Sen mocks the hegemony of English brilliantly with that one liner and, at the same time, also raises questions on how a foreign language can create an identity crisis in a religiously, linguistically, and ethnically diverse nation like India. The entry of the palmist is completely unexpected, as it seems that in search of an interesting story Dipu has chanced upon him, enhancing the stylistic hybridity and rhetorical complexity that discourage any easy interpretation or categorization. Siddhartha's bookshelf displays a copy of Russell's magnum opus, however, although Dipu is presented as an aspiring writer, there is almost no information regarding his choice of reading. The degree of intellectual interactivity thus varies in these two films remarkably. The agitprop style that Sen has cultivated in his early phase of filmmaking has left its mark in 'The Kaleidoscope' also, and it seems that he interrogates his own ethical position as a filmmaker.

Women. In '*The Adversary*', Siddhartha's sister is suspected of having an affair with her boss and thus has become the family's onerous concern. During the early seventies, women's emergence as a substantial workforce is not a matter of comfort for the urban middle-class society which has been hitherto dominated by the masculine gender. It is not clear whether the lady engages herself with her boss on her own will or it's a kind of 'adjustment' to cement her job. In the film, her role is only to accentuate Siddhartha's helplessness and anger. Even Siddhartha's girlfriend also fails to show any character, as she is brought in only as a filler. We don't see a departure from the stereotypical characters of mother, sister, or lover. In the early eighties, the situation did not change to a great extent, but, thanks to the left regime, at least, the outlook was changed

to some extent, and so was the mindset of the male members of the society. This transition is evident in '*The Kaleidoscope*', where a working woman, a teacher, proudly demands respect. She firmly reminds her peevish neighbours that she needs to iron her clothes every day because her workplace demands this. A simple statement registers the protest against the social stereotype, bridging the relationship between personal and political. Here, the women are not simply functioning just to accompany the men, but they demand equal space and reverence, which is crucial to the diegesis. Dipu's mother, sensitive and highly opinionated, is the main driving force behind the smooth functioning of the family's everyday affairs, exhibiting self-reliance amidst its fractured existence.

Dream. '*The Adversary*' has several sequences of dreams and nightmares, some of which are presented with negative images. Here, I will discuss on one dream sequence that derive its far-fetched atmosphere from its dislocation of time and space. Siddhartha finds himself being perished on the guillotine, as the adversaries are becoming too tough to combat. This scene right after the conversation between Siddhartha and his brother where the latter describes the beheading of aristocrats during the French revolution. The visuals, an extreme close-up of Siddhartha's tormented face, fail to arrest and create any sensorial experience for the viewers or to outrage them. The editing technique applied here lacks organic quality that is needed to depict the surreal dimensions. In 'The Kaleidoscope', let's examine how dream formulates. Dipu's mother asks his father to go to the market in the morning, as he is already late; and the availability of fresh vegetables and fishes will go down if he delays further. After this, she enters the bedroom and finds that Dipu is still sleeping. She pushes him to wake up, indicating the time. Dipu wakes up immediately, and pat comes the next scene - a close up of chopping off a big fish. The casual but clever juxtaposition of these two scenes creates a visual metaphor that lays bare the contemporary reality in the disguise of a dream, causing a jerk for the viewers. It is very interesting that without intricating any visual element of dream, the modality of an event can be experienced as an oneiric fear. In both the scenes, the objects - cutter, and the outcome - death due to decapitation - are identical, but the outcome is entirely different. The dream scene mentioned here in '*The Adversary*', along with the other dream sequences, might work to some extent as a device of interruption, but fail(s) to exhibit any greater political insight because of its naive vivacity that compels attention; however, through a dramatic articulation of Dipu's helplessness, characterized by its minimalist aesthetics, Sen's critique of the bourgeois mode of production and its insularity is firmly exhibited in the scene mentioned above. Thus, realism serves here as a formal device of creating an intellectual awareness of the individual quandary, which is almost inevitable in a capitalist society. This film becomes a stage of fidgetiness and tiredness of human soul which one can't escape.

The hippies. After being humbled by another unsuccessful interview, Siddhartha enters a park, takes a seat, and lights up a cigarette. After a while, a group of hippies, dancing and

smoking, enter the scene. Siddhartha gives a cursory look at them and then leaves the place. Without uttering any dialogue the protagonist shows us his inner emotion, but, again, the purpose behind the scene is only to draw further attention to the very fact that Siddhartha is a victim of his time and society, suggesting an other-worldly conviction that does not speak to our collective conscience. On the contrary, Dipu's chance encounter with a couple of hippies conversing with a local palmist, who is trying to deceive them by trickery, works as a telling commentary of the present time and the moral decadence. In addition to that, by presenting the characters belonging to the other side of the globe Sen wishes to portray the fragile connection between the individuals and the different cultural practices taking place in the city, making the film overtly political.

'A moving comedy' - wrote The New York Times on '*The Adversary*' in 1972. I can't help accepting that conclusion. In both the films, similar objects and tropes are used to delineate the contemporary social reality, but the outcome is surprisingly different, for Ray's idea of realism undermines the scope of freeing cinema from the composite of disciplines, although he continuously hones in on his craft. The geniality of Sen can be traced by the fact that his encounter with reality is not just to satisfy the viewers with the most conventional demands of realism but to engage them critically through fragmentation, subversion of plot, and other stylistic innovations, without caring much about the semblance of reality. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the aesthetic of realism is associated with both creating new forms of subjectivity or narrative and as well as re-evaluating the existing ones as a dialogue between ideas.

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