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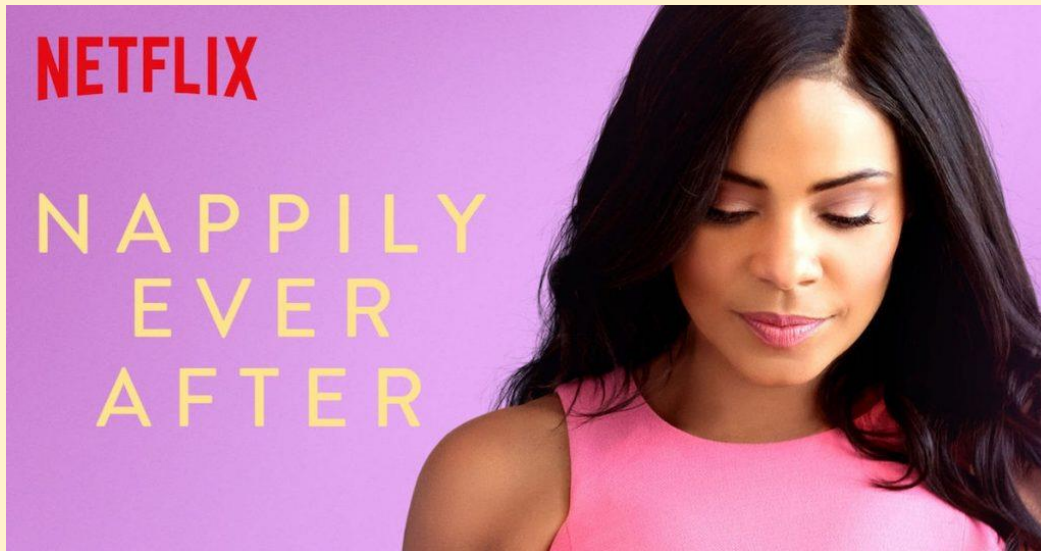**Rekha Datta**

Re-Mediating Realities: Aesthetics of Cinematic Narratives

Discussion about Literature and aesthetics have a complex and a complicated history. From the Classical Age to the present, the discussions record divergent opinions about the purpose of aesthetics (if there could be a 'purpose' to 'aesthetics' and if 'art for art's sake' is a possibility is a part of these discussions). In the West, these queries begin with Plato's distrust of arts, poets and literature which ensued in banning art and artists from his Academy. Beginning with Aristotle, litterateurs have written essays in defense of literature and the vital role it plays in the lives of people and society. In their defense of literature, Aristotle discusses verisimilitude as an integral aspect of literature. Verisimilitude is central to Aristotle's concept of Drama and his notion of 'Tragedy' as well as 'catharsis'. Aristotelian notion of literature foregrounds 're-presenting' life on stage as drama. Thus, literature as 'mirroring life' is not a simplistic 'copying' life. It is a complex act of presenting the reader with an experience of life that s/he witnesses as a 'literary representation'.

In the Indian literary context, Bhrata's *Natya Shastra* defined the aesthetics of arts. "Bharata Muni's Natyashastra set out the basics of rasa theory in this cryptic aphorism, over the interpretation of which Indian Aestheticians have debated over the past two

thousand years: From the combination of excitant determinants (*Vibhava*), expressive consequents (*anubhava*), and transient feelings (*vyabhichari*), the relishable *rasa* (juice) is realized (*rasa -nispattih)*" (Pg 7.2016) Thus, 'Aesthetics is understood to refer to the artistic elements or expressions in a work of art and/or literature. These artistic devices employed by the author to negotiate abstract concepts constitutes a study of aesthetics.'

The same argument holds forth for aesthetics of cinemas. The Western Cinematic movements of the twentieth century-German Expressionism, French New Wave and Italian Neorealism aimed at depicting reality through varied cinematic techniques. The movements were not merely breaking away from the glamourous-superfluous box-office hits of Hollywood Cinemas. They were a conscious effort to present 'life-situations' as 'cinematic moments-as serious 'art form'. These 'visual representations of life' or 'verisimilitude' aimed at providing the empathetic audience with opportunities to re-look at life through the lens. Thus the 'art cinemas' were a conscious effort to re-present a 'slice of life' 'technically' as well as through the 'story' that was narrated as cinema. The cinematic techniques—the camera angle, mise-en-scene, lighting, costume and

the background music—are as integral to the working of a cinema as is the importance of three Unities, the notion of tragic hero and verisimilitude to bring about catharsis to the audience Aristotle envisaged.

However, cinemas captured reality with techniques unique to cinema to present situations 'in most life like manner' were the 'art' cinema; and the 'popular' genre that focused more on the content, while keeping the technical(camera) artistic maneuvers to the minimum. Both these genres attempt to depict reality. In the Indian context, the 'art cinemas' were influenced by the Western Cinematic Movements in the manner of attempting to capture realities. The 'popular', as a genre, followed the indigenous performing arts form, including the song-dance sequences. But, both these genres of the Indian Cinema succeed in capturing the Indian life in their narratives as cinema. Also, the Hindi and the regional cinemas in their own distinct ways blended the indigenous narrative styles with the cinematic techniques to present a characteristically an Indian cinema as they addressed the local concerns and issues of people. The politics of depicting reality in both these genres (as against 'mass cinema') was such that the narrative very subtly interfered with the audiences' accepted stereotypical patterns of thought and behavior. Thus, depicting realities emerged as a major aesthetic artistic endeavor that makes the audience ponder and so impact the thought patterns by this striking verisimilitude to life.

The twenty first century is still haunted by discriminations various types-racial, gender, caste, class. These are the visible ones and much talked about causes. The world of Cinema has reflected these with varied methods and genres. Directors across the globe have presented, critiqued these discriminatory attitudes and situations in a progressive manner. One of the major concerns of the contemporary world is that of the individuals' emerging out of the societal norms and constructs of gendered identities. And when it is about representing gendered realities, the social constructs are hard to break as the personal lives of people have for long been modelled after these constructs. This research paper explores the aesthetics of body, gender in

popular cinemas in the twenty-first century in the context of emerging of the individual out of the subjugative gendered realities and stereotypes the gendered that disrupt the individual's idea of 'self' and 'identity'.

Yet, it is ironical that it has taken so long to address the issues of aesthetics and body. There have been movements to question these constructs and stereotypes repeatedly by women and men-about the myths of the body (viz. slim/fat dichotomy), colour of the skin, type of hair etc. Certain roles and stereotypes about women and men are transnational. It is interesting to see the transformation to these 'common' representations of everyday life realities as they are contextualized in different cultural contexts. Just to name the recent and most popular ones in the Indian Cinema- *Naanu Avanalla, Avalu* (2017, Kannada), *Ondu Motteya Kathe* (2017 Kannada), *ek ladki ko dekha to* (2019, Hindi), *Padmavat* (2019, Hindi), *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021, Malayalam), *Bala* (2019, Hindi), *Tribhanga* (2021, Hindi). And it is heartening to see the popular cinemas narrating breaking the gender constructs and stereotypes. Each of these cinemas have a protagonist who is 'different' from the societal expectations and whose 'looks' are imperfect. In fact, the emerging of the protagonist from the illusion of the social construct is the *bildungsroman* narrative of the twenty first century individual. Each film addresses a gender-based myth, only to bust it in the context of the narrative.

The research paper understands that motifs from fairy tales and myths are employed in cinemas as aesthetics of narration. Both fairy tales and myths are a part of the cultural epistemology of a place and the cultural memory of the community. Employing these motifs in cinemas to question and/or break the gendered realities is one of most effective manner of narration. Thus, an important aesthetic that is employed to break the constructs and stereotypes is the use of myths and fairytale motifs. There is an interesting point of diversion between the Western/American (English) and Indian cinemas. The Western cinemas have engaged with a deconstruction and a retelling of fairy tales and in India, it is mostly the folktales that are retold. Of course, there have been re-telling of

fairytales earlier as well. For example, *Penelope* (2007), *Frozen* (2013), *Into the Woods* (2014), *Shape of Water* (2017) etc in the West; *Naagamandala* (1996, Kannada), *Paheli* (2005, Hindi), *Philluri* (2017, Hindi), *Stree* (2018, Hindi) etc in Indian cinemas are retellings of folktales. One of the significant reasons as to why Indian cinemas work with folk tales is that fairy tales are a western-urban concept. Jack Zipes in The *Fairy Tales and The Art of Subversion* notes this with respect to fairy tales and folk tales:

"The genre originates within an oral story telling tradition and was created and cultivated by adults, and as the tale became an acceptable literary genre first among adults, it was then disseminated in print in the eighteenth century to children. Almost all critics who have studied the emergence of the literary fairy tale in Europe agree that the educate writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted into a type of literary discourse about mores, values and manners so that the children and adults would become civilized according to the social code of that time" (Pg 3. 2006)

In this research paper, the two cinemas— *Nappily Ever After* and *Ondu Motteya Kathe* (*The story of an egg*-literally)—are taken up for discussion to show that the identity of the   individual is remediated by breaking the accepted constructs and stereotypes by breaking the pattern of fairytale and myth through the common motif of 'hair'. The paper analyses the two cinemas as they set up a face-off between the myth of societal notions of beauty versus the self-acceptance of the individual. And in the process, the audience gets to see two different patriarchies and two different but equally complex, problems. Though the focus of the discussion is on the differences between the two cinemas, it is important to note that the two cinemas share certain similarities. A look at the similarities first. Thematically, both the cinemas present and de-mythifies an aesthetic of body and beauty using 'hair' as a motif. Both the protagonists struggle with this myth about their 'looks' and coming to terms with reality actually is about comprehending that they need to change their own understanding of beauty. Both cinemas end with the protagonists willingly

embarking a conscious journey of aesthetics rather than one of looks. And the two cinemas show the protagonist evolve into an individual by embracing 'self' to break away from societal constructs of gender.

Nappily Ever After is the struggle of a young adult woman to come to accept her identity as Afro-American; *Ondu Motteya Kathe* is about a man who is bald and not a handsome looking man yet wishes to marry a 'perfectly beautiful girl'. And this difference is an opportunity to study the influence of myths on gendered realities and their influence on people, their lives. The two cinemas employ a definite pattern to falsify the myth of the societal perception of beauty and the emergence of the not-so-perfect individual as a worthy-being.

'Myth', usually, is used to mean 'false', 'not real'; but it also ". . . stands for a generalized, timeless, universal truth that are understood in a creative imaginative truth of human condition and the myriad variables that influence our moral foundations and ethical choices. A myth explores the things about our world that are fixed, stable and unchanging. . . a lie is a story that is designed to deceive and Myth is a story to illuminate." (Aesthetics and Cinematic Narrative P 13. 2019) Both the cinemas de-mythifies a notion about man, woman and their abilities. Of course, there is always room to disagree with the story, challenge the narrative style and/or question the depiction of the need to change at all. But, as evolving of personality is inevitable, changes to one's attitude and the strength to perceive that situations need to change are also inevitable.

Nappily Ever After (2018) is based on the eponymous novel by Trisha R Thomas. It was released on the Netflix. 'Nappily' is an American rude slang for 'curly hair' though no one knows how or when it has entered the vocabulary. (Online Oxford Dictionary) *Violet*, an Afro-American, a professional who 'looks' perfect in her various roles-looks perfect with eternally permed hair, a successful professional, much in love with her doctor-boyfriend *Clint* and hoping to be 'happily ever after' settled with him. This fairy tale life takes U-turn when *Clint* is unable

to propose and instead presents her a puppy! This shattering experience is also the moment which juxtaposes memories of how her mother would go to extraordinary lengths to keep violet's curled hair straight. It is *Will*, an Afro-American who runs a Salon to help people love their natural selves rather than make-up to people's expectation, and his daughter *Zoe*, whose innocent comfort with her curly hair, helps *Violet* to accept herself-with her nappy hair!

The cinema opens with a familiar fairy tale opening- a perfect, beautiful and successful girl-*Violet*, in love with a prince charming similarly successful-*Clint*, a doctor by profession. Their life together is where many fairytales end. For the audience of *Nappily Ever After* is the journey that *Violet* begins with this shattering moment in her fairy tale life. There are two limitations to this 'prince charming'—he is scared of marrying the almost perfect *Violet*; and he does care about conforming to societal expectations. In fact, he is stereotypical in his attitude that perfect looks are important. In spite of the fact that *Violet* has struggled to a hold of her self—evident in her clean-shaven head to short hair, when they again decide to get married, *Clint* tells *Violet* to perm her hair and wear a stiletto so that she is presentable to his parents and for them to accept her as *Clint*'s wife. *Violet* has to 'look perfect'. *Violet* does look modern and perfect-with short, straightened hair, low back dress and of course, stilettos. She has to be the *Cinderella* who has to fit into her glass-shoes to prove her identity to the prince charming. For *Violet*, this means, she has to conform to the new norms, once again. And when *Violet* goes inside to sit, removes her stiletto, pressing her aching foot, we know the inevitable breakoff. But the surprise is, she does calls-off, embracing herself by jumping into the swimming pool which curls her perfectly permed hair. As she enjoys the cool water, she calls out for everyone to join her: "come in, join. The water is perfectly cool". And not surprisingly, she has many women who join her, including her parents-her mother loses her permed wig which she wears to cover her curly hair.

Just like the 'magical helpers' sustain the 'princess in distress', *Will* and *Zoe* preserve *Violet's* journey to

find happiness in her natural self. But, unlike the fairy tale where the magical beings disappear into no where at the end, *Will* finds in Violet a support to further his hair products that supplement the 'different hair'. *Violet* is now a confident self, speaking clearly about being different and enjoying difference.

In this simple but contrasting weaving of myth and reality, the narrative once again exposes the presence and pressure of patriarchy that allows a woman a career and a man of her choice only to subjugate her by pressing that she 'looks' 'normal' i.e. 'according the accepted notions of society'.
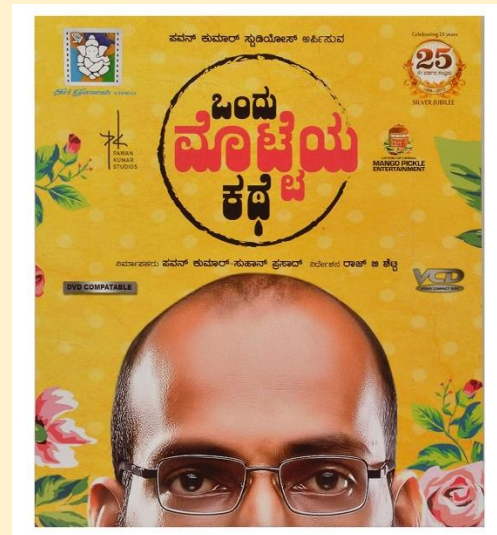
Ondu Motteya Kathe is a rom-com, released in 2017. Unlike *Nappily Ever After*, it does not have the overlapping features of a fairy tale; but it does have the features of a fantasy tale and a myth of ideal 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. And it is against this fantasy that the coming to age of *Janardana* has to be understood. The cinema shows the story of a young man who is balding but wishes to marry a girl who looks beautiful.

Janardana, the protagonist's tale begins when his family astrologer advises him to get married within a year. He is a mismatch to societal expectations from all perspectives-he is thin, balding, not a handsome face. He doesn't match with the societal notions of masculinity. And above all, he is a Kannada lecturer in a College in *Mangaluru*. He wants to marry a girl who is beauty-personified. His colleague, the economics lecturer, is beautiful and he makes all

efforts (including getting her food made by his mother) to win her. When he doesn't succeed, he thinks of *Sarala* (who is rejected by her boyfriend as he thinks she is 'fat') who was his junior in his school. They reconnect over FB messages. And when they meet, he is only too eager for this relationship to fail. *Janardana* chooses *Sreenivas*, a peon in his college, as his mentor. He presumes that *Sreenivasa's* is an ideal marriage. A visit to his home breaks *Janardan's* fascination with beauty-*Sreenivasa's* wife is a hearing-impaired woman. And as she serves them lunch, he tells *Janardana* 'when I tell you I love her, I don't mean just her beauty; I mean- her love for me, her anger, even when she irritates me, I know I love her.' This conversation tolls *Janardana* back to the reality of relationships—the ability and willingness of two people to connect with each other and in this moment of awareness, masculinity is redefined. Repentant, when he seeks *Sarala* who has moved away from him, his younger brother tells *Janardana* that *Sarala* loves and cares for him. When they meet again, the audience sees a much softened, a much willing man to see *Sarala's* beauty.

The cinema brings two likely individuals to come together—both *Janaradana* and *Sarala* are imperfect individuals according the constructs of feminine beauty and expectations of masculinity. Myths do not allow for imperfection; it is folktales that allow for imperfection and mediates reality. In its simple narration, the cinema re-mediates this specific reality of evolving individuals to move towards their own 'perfection'. This may or may not be in accordance with the construct of the society.

In the twenty first century, the theoretical framework under which cinemas are discussed are as varied as the cinematic-narrative techniques. It is important to recognize that 'popular' cinemas are emerging steadily, engaging with serious concerns and issues the contemporary individuals and society is dealing with. It must be remembered that the strength of 'popular cinemas' is in its ability to narrate a good story to its audience, to strike an empathetic chord. So, the current theoretical discussions have begun to recognize this and are willing to pay attention to its relevance, not dismiss the 'popular' cinemas for its so-called lack of 'artistic aesthetics'. And this is a welcome diversification as it makes room for 'popular' genre of cinemas to be taken seriously for their representation and their engagement with narration.

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