



THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SHYAM BENEKAL'S *JUNOON*

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Abstract

This paper explores Shyam Benegal's cinematic interpretation of Ruskin Bond's novella, *A Flight of Pigeons*, focusing on how Benegal's adaptation stands as a distinct work of art rather than a simple retelling. It analyzes the film's exploration of identity and aims to demonstrate how Benegal portrays the heterogeneity within collective social identity, providing support for the salad bowl theory in the context of India.

By closely examining Benegal's creative choices and narrative techniques, this paper uncovers the unique elements that differentiate his adaptation from the original novella. It delves into the film's thematic exploration of identity and the complexities it entails, particularly within the socio-cultural landscape of India.

Through this analysis, the paper aims to highlight Benegal's efforts in capturing the multifaceted aspects of identity and promoting the idea of a heterogeneous society within India. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the film's artistic merit and its engagement with broader discussions on identity and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Cinematic adaptation, Social Identity and Colonialism, Identity formation and crisis, South Asian Cinema

Introduction

It is a long-held belief that films, being a part of literature, contributes to and reflects the socio-cultural changes taking place in society. As a result, artists and filmmakers have found a space on the cinematic screen to paint their visions and interpret the realities through new perspectives. Whenever this happens, some of

the original ideas get lost, but some new insights are gained. "Poetry is what gets lost in translation", said Robert Frost, but Joseph Brodsky retorted, 'Poetry is what is gained in translation'" (Griggs 13). What Frost and Brodsky said regarding poetic translation can also be applied to any adaptation.

Shyam Benegal's *Junoon*, released in the year of 1978, is a cinematic adaptation of the novella *A Flight of the Pigeons* by Ruskin Bond. However, it is important to note that Benegal's adaptation is not a mere retelling of the novella but his own project. As Orson Welles once said in an interview, "the book obviously inspired him, but that each film is a separate, genuine work of art, not dependent on the source material that might have served as its foundation. As long as an artist has something different, something unique to say on a particular subject, it is an entirely different work of art" (Mikulec).

The film is an apt example of how it is a dialogue between two auteurs rather than a mere recapitulation. The film tells a tale of the obsessive love of a Rohilla Pathan, Javed, for a young English girl, Ruth. The question of identity lingers throughout the movie, given that the backdrop is India's first War of Independence.

India, best defined as a salad bowl, is a country where the people feel united by a sense of belonging yet preserve their individuality. The War of 1857 was a poignant event in the history of the subcontinent. It was, perhaps, for the first time that the idea of collective identity emerged with such fervour- Hindustani, they called themselves, the natives of Hindustan (One can hardly ignore the political debates that ensued over the name). It was Firangis that they were fighting united as a group and not one another, maybe for the first time. Benegal takes on the role of an auteur here and uses the screen as a potent medium to capture the undercurrent nuances of identity, politics, and culture that flow through social relationships.

Discussion

The movie starts with the question of identity itself when Mr Labadoor says to Mariam, "Will you kindly tell your mother in a language she can understand" (*Junoon* 15:28-15:32). By doing so, he creates almost immediately a different identity makeup,

highlighting the difference between the sensibility of an Englishman who had made India his home and of the Indian woman who was married into an English family. Here, one needs to remember that "language can be a robust marker of social identity, capable of binding and dividing groups and that its salience may displace other (e.g. ethnic or religious) identities" (Jaspal 17-20). Mr Labadoor further adds to his statement, "People who have not rebelled against their masters for more than two thousand years are quite unlikely to do so tomorrow morning" (*Junoon* 15:33-15:38). By saying so, he not only creates social identities by forming ingroup and outgroup identities - the British and the Indians but also highlights his colonial identity, subsequently throwing light upon the racial stereotype of Orientalism which sees Indians as inferior and submissive. Edward Said (1978), in his book *Orientalism*, asserted that the Orient and Occident together form a binary. He states that Orient is Europe's "contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (10) and that it is Europe which is represented to be civilised at the expense of the East. He further adds, "The relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (13). He states that the West hegemonised the East to construct its own identity and consequently created the East's identity in the process. It was this superior identity of Mr Labadoor that prevented him from anticipating a challenge to his authority and identity; therefore, it comes off as such a shock to the whole family when the rebels killed him at the church. It was after this moment, however, when the question of identity, sets most powerfully. Not only had the Labrador family experienced the loss of their home but also the loss of their identity. The family who had made India their home were shocked when they first encountered the possibility of not having a home. When pushed out into a homeless world without any identity, the family tries to survive these troubled times as best as they can. Their

quest for survival becomes their quest for identity. The life of the Labadoor family ran parallel to that of the East India Company in India. The East India Company had initially come to India to trade in spices. Gradually they became the ruling authority of the subcontinent. With the easy succession from traders to rulers, the Company and the British population started to believe that it was their destiny to rule. The publication of Darwin's theory of Origin of Species further cemented their belief in the social hierarchy. It was a commonly held belief among the British that any threat that might to their empire in India would come from Tsarist Russia. So, it was no surprise that the revolt came as a rude shock to them. Having been defeated and displaced from their position of power in many parts of the subcontinent proved to be an eye-opener for the British population. Akin to the Labadoor family, the Company was fighting for its survival and identity in the subcontinent. "It came as a greater shock than the loss of the American colonies and prompted reprisals far more hysterical and vicious than those visited on rebellious subjects elsewhere in the Empire" (Dash). At the same time, the Indians were celebrating the gain of their political identity: "From now on East India Company's rule has ended in this area, it is again ruled by His Majesty King Bahadur Shah Jaffar of Delhi" (Junoon 40:33-40:56).

India's gain resulted in Britain's loss. When India gained a sense of common identity, the Company lost its identity at the end of the revolt. Its identity as an administrative power was transferred to the British Crown. It is also interesting to note how even after gaining this common identity, the Indians were able to preserve their individual identities- something which Benegal represented acutely. The movie starts with a qawwali. It is noteworthy that while qawwali is a "daughter genre of South Asian Islamic devotional music" (Newell 27), it is in Khari Boli, a variety of the Hindi language. This qawwali is just one of the many examples that Benegal infuses into the narrative to show

the unity yet distinctness of different identities. A few other instances are: when Lala Ramji Lal, a Hindu, was suspected of harbouring the English women, Javed Khan had to come back in his absence to take them away. Javed knew that he would have to kill Ramji Lal, following the Hindu culture, in order to take the Labadoor family away. One also witnesses the same in the scene where Javed Khan comes in search of Ruth, the Hindu women of the household drew the veils across their faces even though the Purdah system was not so adherently practiced by them. When one time, Ramji Lal was visited in his home by one of his Pathani acquaintances, they shared the hookah without any hesitation. Though concentrating on these instances might seem insignificant to some, yet one ought to remember that they are important as they help in highlighting the spirit that Benegal is trying to express. Throughout the movie, Benegal exemplifies such instances where one sees the peaceful coexistence of such diverse groups. At the same time, he artistically contrasts this peaceful coexistence of diverse identities within the same collective identity with the clashes amongst different collective identities. Subsequently, he also highlights the problem that one often encounters whilst forming identities by categorizing people as us and them. According to Henri Tajfel (1978), "an individual's sense of social identity comes from the knowledge of his/her membership of some social group. These groups give people a sense of belonging" (63). He put forward the idea that while grouping the population into us (in-group) and them (out-group), people tend to exaggerate the differences between groups which often leads to intergroup conflicts and violence. This group division is what one observes happening between the British and Indians. "The enemy is always suspect" (Junoon 1:25:24-1:25:25).

"For you, humanity begins when an Englishman is killed. Only he has an identity. With so many Indians, what do

a few dead among them matter?" (Junoon 1:27:17-1:27:30).

It is not just the clash of political identities between Indians and the British that one witness but also the clash of cultural identities. Again, Benegal creates intricate parallels between these cultural clashes, one on the battlefield and the other in the domestic sphere. People often felt that the Company was trying to strip down everything they held culturally dear. Many initiatives taken by the Company, such as Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education, were regarded as disparaging to the Indian culture. However, it was the issue of cartridges that worked as a trigger for the Indian masses.

"But insulting our honour and respect still wasn't enough. It drove Mangal Pandey to turn his gun on them" (Junoon 12:45-12:51).

"It became a crime to refuse cartridges greased with pig's or cow's fat" (Junoon 13:08-13:13).

"Disraeli blamed EIC's (East India Company's) administration policies, the imposition of the settlement of the property and aggressive Christian missionaries for disrupting Indian society and thereby creating an environment conducive to revolt or resistance" (Parliamentary Debates, ed. Ainslee Embree).

In the domestic sphere, one sees various cultural frictions. The difference in eating styles makes up one of many such occurrences. Benegal beautifully contrasts the dining scene of the Christian household with that of a traditional Pathan family, where the Labadoor family eat using spoons while sitting on tables and chairs, and the Pathan family eat using their hands while sitting on the floor. Another instance is the one where Javed makes Ruth and her mother change their clothes and wear something more respectful. "I won't allow

vulgar clothes in this house" (Junoon 1:06:11-1:06:12). Miriam chiding Ruth when she dresses up like a Muslim begum throws light upon these clashes and their cultural sensibilities. "How do I look, mama? / Like a nautch girl!" (Junoon 1:25:30-1:25:35). The clash over the burial style of Mariam's mother further emphasises the conflict. "A Christian burial? How is that possible?" (Junoon 1:48:04-1:48:10).

It would be remiss on one's part if one failed to note how the instability in the political situation triggered identity formation. Throughout the movie, one can see how Ruth's demeanour undergoes a subtle change as she grows more and more relaxed in her skin in Indian clothes. Ruth's grandmother, too, hints at this when she says, "Javed Khan is not as dissolute as you think" (Junoon 1:25:20-1:25:23). But the hesitation of Miriam in marrying off Ruth to Javed throws light on the above-mentioned fact. If she married off Ruth, her present identity would change. She would have to change her cultural identity from a Christian to that of a Muslim. "She'll learn the Quran" (Junoon 1:23:04-1:23:06). But, most importantly, she would be no longer a British and hence unsafe if Indians lose Delhi. This thought prompted her to say, "Then, let Delhi decide the issue. If Delhi is yours, Ruth is yours" (Junoon 1:24:10-1:24:17). The hesitation of Mariam not only throws light upon the above-stated fact but also highlights the identity crisis Ruth might face. Having seen the life of her mother, Mariam was determined on protecting her daughter. Ruskin Bond, himself an Anglo-Indian, beautifully captures the dilemma of identity for this social identity group. A note of curious ambiguity prevails in their identity - a sense of inhabiting two distinct universes, yet not truly belonging to either. It is a theme that one witnesses in many of Bonds' writings. For instance, one can take the example of Bond's (1997) autobiographical novel *The Room on the Roof* where his vulnerability is revealed through the character of Rusty when he says, "I don't belong here... I don't belong anywhere. Even if I

have papers, I don't belong" (94). It is also known that Bond migrated in search of identity but was left even more unsure than ever. In his autobiography *Scenes from a Writer's Life*, he writes- "I did not belong to the bright lights of Piccadilly and Leicester Square; or, for that matter, to the apple orchards of Kent or the strawberry fields of Berkshire" (Bond 155). This dilemma of identity is also beautifully communicated by Ijeoma Umebinyuo (2015) in her poem *Diaspora Blues*, "so, here you are/ too foreign for home/ too foreign for here/never enough for both." It is commendable how Benegal, who is of an entirely different sensibility than Bond's, presents this angst judiciously.

Conclusion

Through analyzing Shyam Benegal's take on Bond's novella, this paper examined how Benegal not only explored the questions of identity in different aspects but also highlighted the anguish of people like Bond, who struggled to find their own identity. Imprints of Benegal Bengali sensibility are also discerned when one witness how beautifully he justifies the Salad bowl theory for India. In addition to that, this paper illustrates how through this film, Benegal captured and infused the reality of contemporary times. The 1970s was a decade when India as a country was struggling with its own identity. There was discontent all around. Unemployment was rampant as was corruption; Smuggling and black marketing were common; the memory of Emergency was still fresh as was that of the Bangladeshi war; Feminist movements and student protests were on the rise. It was during this time Benegal made this movie; therefore it is no wonder that one sees the issue of identity present in different layers.

It is significant to point out here that, though the paper attempted to analyze the question of identity in its entirety, it has not been able to do so, given the paucity of time. As a result, several vital angles, such as feminism, violence, trauma, and racism, were left unexplored, which can be investigated in

further studies. Furthermore, the work chosen was the product of men's imaginations and perspectives; it would be an intriguing focus of study regarding how female filmmakers treat these issues and how their treatments differ from that of their male counterparts.

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