

Critique

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Ami O Manohar (*Manohar and I*) - Loneliness Lovely Face



“Regarding, then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the tone of its highest manifestation — and all experience has shown that this tone is one of sadness. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.” -- The Philosophy of Composition, Edgar Allan Poe.

Has anyone lately come across a contemporary Indian film, play, book, or music composition that breaks the mold, makes you gawk at it with all your senses, bewitches you with its exquisiteness and sensitivity, and brings about a feeling that you are running across the length and breadth of the composition without so much as moving a single muscle of your brain?

Well, *Ami O Manohar* (2018, Language: Bengali. Director: Amitabha Chattopadhyay) is one such varicoloured film that has rewarded me with such experience. It is a cathartic and lyrical meditation not only on loneliness or bated hopes but on the human existential crises, when “Everything has been figured out, except how to live” (Sartre).

You will find something so comely raw here, something so harrowing and real, which creates a visceral sensation that may rain on your parade; however, the experience will be engraved into your memory. The rhetorical simplicity, accidental imperfections, and stylistic hybridity resist any flat interpretation and force us to re-examine the boundaries of contemporary Bangla (or Indian) cinema in a global context.

Amitabha has consciously essayed to refrain from partaking in the celebration of avowed idioms - easy-peasy or arty-farty narration, dulcet music, pulchritudinous actors, overambitious dolly-jib-drone, fast cutting, etc. - over. He presents his musings in a way that does not let them lose their subtle charm but embellish them as the story unfolds, transforming the film into an alluring tale of vizards, memory, and the eternal pursuit of a deeper kind of truth. We may take it as a read that he is well supported by his team.

Kolkata, the city with all its splendour and morbidity, is one of the characters of this film. With the human sea forming its luscious lips, always

hungry for more secrets, its long stretched-out roads with heavy traffic marking its tensed brow - the city's charm is still unmatched.

Among the vast populace of this megacity, Amitabha gets us acquainted with three of his aides - a working lady, her elder sister, who always seeks refuge in her past, and Manohar, an aged person on the edge of retirement. The experiences of the 'four' different characters may be varied, but they have one thing in common - melancholy descends over all of them. They are seeking an anchor in the shifting sands of a hard time.

The lady and Manohar are the two central characters of the film. Amitabha does not wish to create emotional identification with the characters; rather, he continually encourages us to focus on wider concerns. The film starts with a melopeia, and later comes the further indelible vignettes. The two protagonists meet every day while they are on their way back home from work and confab about their mundane lives; however, slowly, we realize that they are exchanging outright lies to hide their loneliness from each other. And the lady's round the bend elder sister - the ruler of the enigmatic republic of the new moon - who scarcely ever wears a smile and constantly rails against her sister. All of them are full of gloom and doom, and their loneliness moves in the colour of helplessness.

The lady, who seeks only her ration of common humanity, strangely retains her innocence amid her crude surroundings, and Manohar can be defined as a juxtaposition of contradictions. At the outset, he seems to be a recluse who is composed and in control of his emotions and hardly cares for human company. But gradually, we get to know the real Manohar. His emotions are much entwined with the moods and souls of people around him as anybody else. When the lady has come to know about Manohar's sudden demise, she is lucked into a paper of blankness - the fifth character of the film. She, bereft of hope, has a painful epiphany about the absurdity of the event. We see her hemming and hawing around. The intractable nonchalance of her white dolor is perfectly captured by the unworrying eye of the lens, which, throughout the film,

unfailingly takes on the role of a grease pencil and mother's picturesque image-realities, pushing the limits of what can be shown on screen. The distress is what compresses and sustains the character's depth.

"The camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own" (Sontag) - this film has reasserted the statement; credit goes to the awesome twosome - Modhura Palit and Amitabha Chaterji. Their eminence in cinematography, multiplied by Sk Abdul Rajjak's (the artist in charge of Sound Design & Mixing) creative thinking, makes the film tinged and framed by a tumultuous silence.

Amitabha has created immersive spaces packed with sensuous and emotive charges through the panoply of divergent cinematic techniques, which may make your toes curl. It is a work of an astute filmmaker who has ascertained the value of narrative economy to such a degree that the film attains the plainness of a fable. However, we're confronted with different spaces, character types and relations, and interpersonal cadence. He annuls, not sure, knowingly or unknowingly, the Cartesian ideal of rational self-knowledge by not offering any clean-cut understanding of the three characters' psychology. Therefore, few viewers may not cotton to how this kind of filmic venture sets the table for the maker's sleight-of-hand.

There are few indelible moments. I shall start with that scene where Manohar is chatting up the lady inside a moving tram. It's a wide shot, and thanks to the auteur, he does not use shallow focus here, allowing us to get the sense of space in its integrality. Private and public life move cheek by jowl. There is always the sense that what we see or hear here is a part of a larger whole; thus, personal has become political. This scene is followed by a series of black-and-bright scenes (in this film, black has also become a character), where we see Manohar bowing and scraping, heightened by using diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. The aloneness and forlornness of Manohar are perceptible to the eye. Here, the ingenious lighting scheme reminds me of the elements of ingenuous stage-lighting practices. The last scene of this series, in which we don't see

Manohar anymore, demands special attention. We see the obfuscated face of Manohar, sitting calmly on an armchair inside his room. The room can be described in this way: where darkness (better to say Blackness) is steeper, but shadows are the deepest. It seems we're watching a theatre. The image says everything without inciting the desire for, or even the attainability, of a verbal expansion, offering a profound, otherworldly effect. We are forced to encounter intense immobility. The montage (one might think of the Kuleshov Effect, but it's not the case) epitomizes a permeative sadness and the absurdity of time. The lines penned by Simon, *mirabile dictu*, leaps to my mind in a New York minute:

And how the room is softly faded
And I only kiss your shadow, I cannot feel your
hand You're a stranger now unto me.

Lost in the dangling conversation and the superficial
sighs
In the borders of our lives

Time. Time is an essential factor in this film: "Time simultaneously makes the present past and preserves the past in itself" (Deleuze). The scintillating long takes and the film's slow pace face the temporalities of capitalism head-on, provoking us to muse anew both on cinema and our conception of social reality. Lately, I have been in a kick rereading Deleuze's works, which makes it easier for me to sense how the auteur consciously perplexes the narrative by manipulating time. He questions our comfort level in the ordinary with the drawn-out scenes and limited plot development. He takes the metaphysical concept of time into account, undermining our coeval lifestyle, where skilfulness, cunningness, gloss, and speed have reigned supreme. The dilation of time allows us to become entirely absorbed in the spatial properties of the individual scenes and makes us conscious of the screen time. The passage of space in time draws even with the recorded presentation of time. The spatial dimension of 'continuance or persistence in time' has achieved a phenomenological depth. The moments of our cognitive process and the

temporal dimension registered in the images are fused. Here, the import of cinematic dwelling is the lostness in the imminence, for the exacting conscious gaze of the camera, even where time is lost incessantly in our gaze, permitting silence to soar.



Space. This film's systematic representation of private and public space enables us to gain subjective awareness of 'space.' The use of nominal lighting also lures a process of exegesis from the viewers to understand the importance of space. Moreover, we get to see a particular place (we may recall Foucault's concept of 'Heterotopia') repeatedly to visually convey the character's (the lady) solitariness and cross, which further confirms: "Space is fundamental in any form of communal life"; however, the composition of those shots could have been different. The prolonged duration of shots also offers the sensory intensity of space. Amitabha provokes enthrallment and distance at the same time.

Action and motion. The film is filmed with an often-motionless camera which esteems the subjects as they, more or less, regard nothing in particular. Mobility complements immobility's compliment, and the fractured spatiotemporality of the images evokes a surrealistic impulse, although Amitabha has not jumped through hoops to display his auctorial muscles by staging overwhelming scenes. The use of time and the choice of the texture of the images - to me, it's an act of rebellion - demand the viewer's engagement with the screen as a fourth wall, which is to be crossed to penetrate the unconscious. It is a cine-

essay about the interchangeability of faces, movements, emotion, otherness, and being-and-nothingness. Here, the tension between the dialogues and the eidetic images functions as a dialectical trope. The narrative thus brought forth, while always in the present is in nimity of the present as well. The boundary between outside and inside has become muzzy because of the 'spatialization of time and dynamization of space' (referring to Panofsky). I think the picture of Amitabha's auctorial identity is plotted into a field of cinematic modernism, which could be further extended into the realms of theatre (I'm not sure whether the works of Beckett or Genet have their impact on the auteur). Life is but a Ferris wheel.

Amitava's grim narrative is loaded with non-affirmative images as well as the association and

connotation of ideas, and - need I add - he has husbanded his resources well, something which an independent filmmaker is bound to do. His is a minimalist approach: limited camera movements, reduced use of score, economized dialogues, and a total rejection of enjoyable hokum. The players have done a peerless job. However, I failed to understand the rationale behind the overuse of wide lenses; also, the inclusion of Lalon's song is abso-blooming-lutely uncalled-for, as it disturbed the soundscape of the film. Anyway, I would like to thank the auteur for giving us a free hand in lapping up this A-one film - germane to the global cinema - at his own pace and adding to it the flavours of our very own, unique selves. It is the quintessence of new-age Indian art cinema

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