

Critique

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Manikbabur Megh



Manikbabur Megh (The Cloud and the Man), 2021, Director: Abhinandan Banerjee

Manikbabur Megh by award-winning director Abhinandan Banerjee can be added to the list of minimalist films that hold you in thrall. Little happens, or so the viewer is led to believe. The film must keep rolling for us to understand that the simplicity of the story and the absence of expression on the face of the protagonist conceal a density of emotion and imagination.

The opening shots give you a panoramic view of a city's roof-scape. A man is sleeping on the terrace of a building. As dawn breaks, he rises, waters the many lush plants around him, and folds clothes.

His ailing father lies in his modest, austere flat downstairs, paralyzed and bedridden. Manik, a middle-aged stony-faced, bespectacled man of few (or no) words, tends to him, cleans, and feeds him – all quietly. Nothing is said. Then off he goes to the market to buy fish, which he will cook for his dad.

The office is just another space – little more than the clichéd, run-of-the-mill chair-table-files corner—Grey the office, grey the market, grey the house, grey the apartment building.

Workdays, we realize, are tediously repetitive. The office makes you sleepy, the house makes you feel dull, and cleaning and feeding the father is a diurnal routine. But two little cracks in the tedium act as saviours: the recitation lessons he gives a little boy and his verdant plants, which absorb the abundant rain and sun on the terrace.

Not that this black-and-white film is soundless. Arguments erupt in the background, there are quarrels as in every chawl and derisive comments too – some likely from the owner of Manikbabu's rented flat – about the runaway jungle upstairs, about how they plan to throw him out once his father dies.

And there is magical music at moments of inner intensity.

As if in consonance with the film's unhurried tempo and Manikbabu's quiet life, death, too, come in gently, discretely. One morning, the father dies with his transistor near him. His death was probably foreseeable, but it brings little change of expression to Manik's visage. Once the cremation is done, Manik comes home and sits on his father's bed, the old man's transistor in hand. On the face of it, the father's passing has caused little stir in his heart, but the ordinariness of Manik's behaviour belies the gravity of the change in him, belies the sense of solitude and the intensity of the vacuum within, all of this enhanced by Chandan Sen's brilliant portrayal of Manik and by Anup Singh's excellently restrained camera work and his deft use of light and shade.

A sympathetic neighbour watches him through the window and pays him a condolence visit. Then Manik takes a boxful of his father's belongings (including the transistor) and empties the contents in a garbage dump – a truly grey scene. No tears flow, no words are uttered. And you wonder if this is part of a philosophical detachment that he is undergoing, or if it is the ebb and flow of life, and he has accepted it as such.

And so, what happens now? What next? This is where the film changes course, gently, with the same degree of quietude. On his way home after eating at a roadside food stall and then as he climbs up to the terrace, Manik sees a cloud in the clear sky. With a dot. Is it his imagination? A hallucination? He is afraid. No one else seems to be able to see it. Puzzled and disturbed to first, he gradually becomes possessed. And he wonders: should I start a conversation?

He does – at night, on the rooftop; he talks to the cloud almost like a lover, urges it to say something.

The little stirring in his heart and the rain that has moistened and refreshed the plants both seem to give him a new lease of life: a smile (at last!) that betrays a sense of pleasure within. He buys a new shirt as if dressing up for a lady-love; and a kite to fly towards the cloud, the cloud that he adoringly photographs. He wants to be with cloud in a house. "But what if we don't find one? You can't become a human being like me, but I will become like you, will float, will travel to the hills." It could be his imagination running riot, it could be a psychological change in him. "Say something," he urges the cloud. His friend, who only sees a clear sky, is convinced that Manik has gone bonkers!

And thus, we move towards an enigmatic end. Manik was to move into another flat, but he hasn't yet. He has no idea whatsoever of how the most basic things work in the world. He is cleanly cheated out of his pocket, jilted by a broker. But it seems to matter little. "Have you not shifted yet?" asks his friend. Manik hands him the keys to his flat. "I take your leave," he says; then repeats an earlier gesture: he throws a box of his belongings (as he had done his father's) in the garbage dump. And perhaps traces a new path in life, detaching himself from the old one.

One last flight up to the terrace to see his beloved plants, one glance, one wide joyful smile at the thundering sky. And the screen grows dark.

And Manik?

Absent.

A simple cinema language can yield an absorbing film. *Manikbabur Megh* is one such.

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