

Critique

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***Bandini* By Bimal Roy**



*Bandini* is the first Hindi film to depict the story of a woman prisoner imprisoned for life for a murder she committed and confessed to without making any plea for forgiveness or harbouring any sense of guilt. The story is told mainly in flashbacks from Kalyani's point of view. Most of the time, she is present within the cinematographic space of the film either visually or within the sound ambience, also used at times as a strategy to move back into her past. Bimal Roy used imagery and sound beautifully to convey the changing and sometimes volatile moods of Kalyani, enacted by Nutan in the most powerful performance of her career. One noticeable change Bimal Roy made in this film is changing the name of the original character of the prisoner from Hena to Kalyani. Kalyani, derived from the word "kalyan", meaning "welfare", is turned into an adjective in Kalyani that defines a woman born to work towards the welfare of fellow beings. This is borne out at several points very clearly and subtly at different ends over the film, as we shall soon see.

Very few films feature the protagonist as a prisoner in Hindi cinema. Even if she is placed behind bars,

she is shown as trapped by negative characters who have conspired against him. Her imprisonment is temporary, and her space within the prison occupies little time in the narrative and cinematographic space of the film.

**Synopsis**

Kalyani, an inmate of a women's ward of a prison in pre-independent India, is determined to serve out her full term. Though he wants to marry her, she resists the subtle but strong overtures of the prison doctor, Devesh. She is afraid to marry him because of her scarred past and his pure one. She is determined to sustain the social difference between herself and Devesh. She believes that her presence in his life will destroy his future because of the social stigma she will carry as social and emotional baggage with her into his life forever.

Kalyani writes her story in a notebook for Deven to read, and the film cuts back to a flashback, going back to Bengal in the 1930s. As the motherless daughter of the village postmaster, Kalyani gets emotionally involved with Bikash Ghosh, a political

activist and anarchist always on the run from the British police. Once, Bikash falls very sick, and while tending to him, Kalyani falls asleep and happens to spend the night in his room. To rescue her from scandal, Bikash tells everyone that Kalyani is his wife. Before leaving the village, he promises Kalyani's father that he will return and marry his daughter. But he never does.

The father and daughter become targets of ridicule and social outcasts, forcing Kalyani to run away in the darkness of night to save her father from further humiliation. As she runs away, the soundtrack fills up with a beautiful situational song rendered by Mukesh – *O jaanewale ho sake to laut ke aana*. She takes up an ayah's job in the woman's ward of a hospital. A particular patient, a neurotic woman, makes life difficult for Kalyani. One evening, when the patient's husband visits, Kalyani is made the butt of her insults. Kalyani discovers by chance that this is the woman whom Bikash married, leaving her in the lurch. The same night, a telephone call informs her of her father's sudden death in an accident. These three incidents piled one upon the other disturb her deeply. Later that night, Kalyani poisons the woman not in a fit of rage exactly but as if in a trance-like state consequent upon seeing her father's innate dead body on the hospital bed.

But having read her diary, Devesh is still willing to marry her, and his mother is prepared to accept her too. As she waits for the train to take her to Devesh's home, she runs into the terminally ill Bikash, waiting for the steamer on the other side of the matted wall of the waiting room. The young boy with Bikash tells her that Bikash's marriage was a part of his commitment to the freedom struggle and adherence to the rules drawn out by his party where he had to marry this woman with a mental problem. When the steamer sounds its hooting, ready to set sail, Kalyani rushes up the shaky wooden plank to join him. S.D. Burman's voice belt out *mera saajan hai us paar, main is paar, o mere maajhi ab ke baar, le chal paar*. The lines *main bandini hoon piya ki, main sangini hoon saajan ki* fill the soundtrack, spelling out the basic ideology of Kalyani. She is a prisoner of love from beginning to end, and the physical reality of her actual imprisonment is just a symbolic

representation of this love. The fact that she has landed behind bars for committing murder is traced back to her feeling of being betrayed in love.

### Analysis

The imaginative and aesthetic use of sound and imagery through Black-and-White frames to express the loneliness, the sense of alienation, and the total lack of guilt Kalyani experiences within the prison are unforgettable. Standing alone in a corner of the jail compound facing the prison's high wall, Kalyani can hear the horse's hoofs on the soundtrack pulling the horse carriage carrying Devesh away. Just before she is to kill Bikash's wife, Kalyani sits with her back to a grilled window, her face in relief against backlighting, the sounds of a welding machine somewhere in the neighbourhood hammering nails of sound into the sinister ambience of the evening. Her hands tremble a bit when she pours the poison from the bottle, but her eyes burn with the determination of something terrible she has decided to do, regardless of its consequence. Later, it appears she committed the act in a trance and came out of it when the murder is discovered the following day. Incidents building up towards this murder are carefully set up to establish her psyche. The friend, whose husband helped her get the a in the hospital, calls her to inform her that her father has met with an accident in the city. He had come searching for Kalyani. Kalyani rushes out. When she reaches the hospital, her father is dead. She walks back, silent. The recalcitrant patient screams out to her.

The scenes in the hospital shown in flashback offer some of the best examples of ambience or ambient sound<sup>i</sup> in Hindi cinema. The murder unfolded in a flashback, is committed in the nursing home where the victim is admitted as a person with a mental health condition and where Kalyani works as an ayah. The night before the murder, Kalyani is shown seething with cold anger at her repeated insults by this patient. She sits against a window, throwing sparks and flashes of light, apparently from a welding unit. The backlight from these sparks and flashes frames her dark face. Her face is dimly visible. The loud and irritating sound of welding juxtaposed against Kalyani's silence both heightens and

intensifies her intent to kill her humiliator (who is also the woman she identifies as having snatched her lover and destroys her life) in cold blood. Kalyani pumping the pressure stove to make tea, the sound of the lit stove, Kalyani happening to overhear a conversation between the woman and her husband, the woman throwing away the cup and saucer while screaming at Kalyani, Kalyani's silence juxtaposed against the irritating and eccentric outpourings of the mentally sick woman, Kalyani letting out a crazy scream when the murder is discovered, are some examples of ambient sound.

Every frame is carefully designed, well-orchestrated and spilling over with layers of meaning. Kalyani and Deven are constantly shown together in their early meetings without any barrier. But when Deven proposes, we see a door between them. Kalyani turns down his proposal without having to look at him. The door could be read as a signifier of the barrier Kalyani feels exists between the honest, respectable, kind and committed prison doctor and herself, a prisoner executed for life for murder.

After this scene, the two are always shown from two sides of a given space with a barrier between them. If he is outside the room, she is inside, and he sees her through the window's bars. From Kalyani's point of view, she sees him standing outside through the bars of her cell window. The final issue of separation comes when she does not see him at all but hears the horse's hoofs and the rolling wheels of his carriage. The call of the prison guard announcing *Sab Theek Hai* (everything is fine) spells out the opposite – nothing is fine. These spells out the irony behind the prison walls where prisoners, stripped of their human identity, are mere numbers; where life is reduced to an eternity of waiting to go out to an unkind world that will not accept them or to die inside. The prison guard's call is used three times in the film. The first time it happens, we see a freedom fighter being taken into prison. The second time, Deven resigns and is going back home. The last time the guard calls out *sab theek hai*, the freedom fighter is being put to the gallows. These function as subtle and underplayed counterpoints in the film. The song *mat ro maata, laal there bahu tere* while the freedom fighter is being marched to the gallows and

his family cries outside the prison gates appears a bit melodramatic in retrospect because it does not belong.

Bimal Roy uses the spaces within the jail compound and the prison bars as powerful symbols depicting openness and imprisonment. They represent everything: the prisoners' seclusion, separating them from others and imprisoning them within their hold. The open spaces within the prison are seemingly open, but they offer respite for Kalyani to think, to retrospect and in some ways, to create a distance between herself and the other prisoners. The other women prisoners are placed in these spaces to do their prison jobs, such as grinding the floor on a big grindstone, singing songs that carry resonances of the home they have left behind, getting into fights and even making sarcastic comments about one of the jail officer's 'generosity towards Kalyani. Kalyani remains immune to these and keeps to her own.

The bars, on the other hand, symbolise Kalyani's quiet acceptance of her destiny spent in prison. When one of the woman prisoners is diagnosed as suffering from TB, and the female warden collects the others to ask who would like to volunteer to nurse her, Kalyani steps forward. When an appeal is made to her for an early release, she says she does not want an early release. When the jail doctor adds an egg to her menu because she is looking after a TB patient and needs better nourishment than the others, she puts her foot down and says no. The fellow prisoners throw barbs at her for this 'special treatment', but she does not respond. It is as if she does not mind remaining a prisoner forever, perhaps because she suffers from a sense of remorse for a crime she realises the gravity of much after she has committed it. It is not a cold or calculated murder but a murder committed on the spur of the moment out of a sense of deep rage, frustration, grief and revenge. She feels guiltier at that point for her father's death than for the murder she has committed. The script remains quiet about her feelings of guilt, and the director leaves this for the audience to read into and conclude. One can even see the flowering of spring from behind the bars, which signifies the passage of time on the one hand and the lack of change in the lives of the inmates behind bars on the other.

Bimal Roy remained staunchly faithful to Jarasandha's original story. The Bengali film version, *Tamasi* (1958), of the same novel retained the name. Still, it changed the story's texture, turning Bikash into a negative character and suggesting Kalyani's union with Devatosh in the end. Roy changed the girl's original name from Hena in the story to Kalyani in the film, picking the name of another female prisoner from the original novel.

In *Bandini*, Nutan communicates mainly with her eyes because she talks very little in the film. Nutan stripped the character of Kalyani of any highly charged emotion or theatrics. She underplayed the character, fleshing Kalyani out as a quiet but determined woman with a dignity that belied her prison backdrop and her murderer status. Her mental state is expressed through a flood of fleeting emotions on her face, especially in the scenes leading up to the murder and afterwards. When the body is discovered the following day, she pulls at her hair, her sari falling

off her chest, screaming out that she is the one who has killed the woman. Nutan had almost given up films after marriage. She was pregnant when *Bandini* was being made. Bimal Roy persuaded her to accept the role. Nutan once said, "Two of my best roles were penned by Nabendu Ghosh for *Sujata* and *Bandini*. These films by my favourite director Bimal Roy brought out two unknown aspects of womanhood and fired an intensity not seen in any other film of mine. Nabendu-da and Bimal-da formed one of the greatest script-writer-director combination duos of Indian cinema." It marked a new beginning in her career. The critical success of *Bandini* saw her career move from strength to strength.

<sup>1</sup> Ambience is widely used as a synonym for ambient sound. Ambient sound consists of noises present in the environment. (Ref : <http://www.filmsound.org/terminology/adr.htm>)

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