

Critique

Manoj Barpujari

Trauma, Agony, and Metaphoric Jhelum



Doing nothing is often the most violent course of action we can take.

– Slavoj Zizek

(*Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*)

Rarely does a film's narrative get immersed in daytime darkness and horrific nights, casting a surrealist shadow as this one. The outdoor scenes are grey in tone with the dominant colour in blue and sunshine is deceptively present in graveyards only. Indoor shots are from dimly lit homes or from chambers with chiaroscuro effect. Debutant filmmaker Prabash Chandra's well-acclaimed feature *I Am Not the River Jhelum* (2021) which is yet to be censored (till the time of writing this piece), has already earned praises in a section of film festivals owing to its appalling account of reality in Kashmir valley. There is an eerie silence and a plethora of

disturbing images unveiled through the distressing gaze of a young girl who finds some respite only after taking refuge in a relative's Delhi home towards the fag end of the story.

Before going into the details of the film's cinematic expression, let me eulogize three facts about the man behind the camera, the director himself. It really feels good, in first case, when someone from outside Kashmir, not a Muslim by religious identity but a Hindu by name, makes a film that produces a counter-narrative to the hegemonistic nationalist dogma. The film provides a pure empathetic take on the suffering of people

irrespective of age and gender, as the narration hovers around the prevalent uncertainty and violence caused by the dominating power of the state, not by the outlawed militants in the valley. It provides some unavoidable grain of truth to a public hyperbole on displacement and death propelled by *The Kashmir Files*— the recent movie that enjoyed propagandist backing of the government but failed at drawing unreserved support of the film fraternity. If a reel-life design proves discreditable, then the other intent of putting things in a politically correct stance may appear encouraging.



Second most important thing is a pleasant surprise which is the academic background of the writer-director. Hailing from outside the Arts or the Humanities, a person who is qualified as Nuclear Physicist, now treading an exclusively different path to explore a highly militarized zone in South Asia, and that too with lenses sympathetic to the common men caught in a crossfire situation, entails a serious vetting. It tells about the conviction with which the filmmaker goes an extra mile to put himself in examination by his understanding of the hard reality where the basic freedom of livelihood, expression and movement is under constant and threatening surveillance. The artist's job is to take side with the beleaguered lives, give voice to the voiceless, and to align with conscience. The young filmmaker Prabash Chandra has done his job sincerely and excellently, never to disappoint the ever-increasing need to defend the rights of dissent in the larger public sphere and to save the sanctity of artistic embodiment in particular.

Thirdly, the scenes of intimate facial revelations in the face of fear and subjugation with no recourse to diatribes or melodrama, not even relying

on background music, speak for themselves. The director's handling of the characters conveys an evocative language which is non-linear and well set with stylized acting. He seems to have a special knack for theatre with varied experiences from writing and directing plays, from his association with an amateur theatre group; and given the adverse conditions, he did the best possible to explore the language of suffering by grooming up the casts in acting workshops. But the acts in that fervour don't generate hatred for the men who are responsible for abuse of power, but at the same time they invoke deep empathy for the victims. That's the power of humanitarian spirits which charges the script of *I Am Not the River Jhelum*. This gives a whiff of fresh air against the stereotype about Kashmir, as offered by the mainstream diabolics in Bollywood and its matching counterparts in the South.

The narrative thus never gives way to hatred or propaganda, though the film is entirely based on the presence of state agencies as perpetrators of fear and suppression. Although there is a central character to the film's unusual plot structure, it isn't based on familiar characters, but on tropes of anxiety and uncertainty in day-to-day life of the commoners: their minds are flagrantly unravelled by deserted streets, thinly attended classrooms, gloomy living rooms, abandoned houses, discarded boats, graveyards, heaps of used cartridges on the road, military convoys, shuttered shops, sometimes a wayward insane, sometimes by the quiet river. Terror of a dehumanized land is borne by the defamiliarized images of either side of river Jhelum, and Afeefa is not just the principal character but epitome of the ongoing ordeal of Kashmir. A poem in voice-over says, among many other similes, "I am someone without a face, a stranger/ I am a trembling shadow next to a torn shoe and mud/ I am broken, disgraced, and mad/ I am not river Jhelum..." The river thus models for a depersonalized metaphor in this film.

Sensitive filmmakers are quite sure of what reciting poems spell out in addition to the inherent poetic beauty. But when Prabhas Chandra uses poems as substitute of verbal intimation or situational exigencies, it informs the structure. Not only that, it becomes integral to the audio-visual

construction of the premise, and adds to the break from conventional storytelling. Referring to Mahmoud Darwish, the celebrated Palestinian poet, writer-philosopher Judith Butler asked: “What would we do without poetry? It gives us no direction, but against all odds, a new political cartography.” Yes, there’s an unmistakable political urgency, running through *I Am Not the River Jhelum* the film, which fathoms the politics of human expression and urge—but it’s not delimiting its direction, it has rather a humanly retouched direction which is explicitly non-religious, non-bigot, and which also stands out against guilt-conscience of the Indian civil society. The film’s treatment of the subject can thus be held morale boosting for all who had reservations about the abrogation of Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir but couldn’t do anything about it and who might be pleased seeing that someone from among them had done something against violence. Slavoj Zizek might get ecstatic if the film reaches his pc! The flow of the narrative, much like the serenely paced river in the film, lodged six poems including Rabindranath Tagore’s “Where the mind is without fear” and poems by Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Inder Salim from whose poem the title of the film has come.

The metaphorical connection between the river and the central character Afeefa is unmistakably pre-eminent, both being bystander to traumatic troubles, from disappearance to death. She is traumatized by her childhood memory of her uncle disappearing, and her bestie Shibu getting lost in the dark pathways under her very nose after patrolling security-men called them to halt. As Shibu didn’t turn up for days, a group of students with Afeefa put up posters on the sidewalks asking for the whereabouts of the missing girl. Cut to a close-up of a girl asking the question repeatedly: “Shibu has been missing since the last three days. Have you seen her?” Camera then zooms out to show other girls echoing the same, further zoom-out revealing a man in military outfit surrounded by the girls who hesitatingly downs their pants or kurtas, one by one, and then all of them remain still while lying in the floor with their feet raised, forming a human installation. It’s an allegory of girls and women gang-raped and murdered in the valley invoking

intimate theatre style: which may be inspired by one single performance piece, but the style is reminiscent of the ‘Ritual of Suffering’ theorized and practiced by theatre guru Heisnam Kanhailal, who set his epoch-making work *Draupadi* in Manipur’s nauseating circumstance that everybody knows.



Torture and protest both comes up in that particular group scene. It’s a measured act of protest, in sync with the overall poetic revelation. The questioning female voices apparently in unison soon turn discordant. The cacophony symbolizes public outcry against excesses committed by the security forces. But isn’t it another signifier of the ground reality where many outfits operate in conflicting degrees of priorities? A carefully presented roadside vagabond with his mighty histrionics further justifies the existent mood that stashed the normal protestation. It’s immediately understood that the eccentricity of the man stems out of an unbearable cruelty in interrogation he was subjected to. Life in the valley comes to such a pass that even the eerie silence, with sporadic sounds of gunfire and sirens appear a routine, sometimes a ticking clock indicating an existentialist crisis; whereas the TV news of the government decision on Article 370 with footage of the Home Minister of the country announcing amidst noises in the parliament sends shivers down the veins: in an indoor scene the father stopped peeling an apple, and the daughter stopped reading a book when the news was telecast. That means worse days are arriving for them. Real footage of stone pelting and shelling at mobs is matched with gruesome torture scenes of detained individuals.

The opening sequence of a lake, cut to an extreme close-up of Afeefa, which then is dissolved to a handheld shot of a man lamenting while walking

past rows of graves: “The dead are selfish– they make us cry and don’t care, they stay quiet in the most inconvenient places. The dead are selfish, we have to carry them on our backs to the tombs as if they were children. What a burden!” In fact graveyards form another motif of the narrative which is necessitated by disappearing men and women. A younger Afeefa lost her middle-aged intellectual company, her uncle, in this eventuality, who actually taught her to relate her understanding of life and world as well as the stars and the cosmos. When she is sick, her father ventures out to get medicine braving the fear of security checking, only to come back halfway as a frightened Afeefa informs about visiting army men at home looking for him. A tracking shot along a river pans over an abandoned palatial house which wears signature of the volatile time with open, unguarded windows, in addition to strokes of the oar through the water, unseen but heard, dictating the somber lull. Lines from a poem in voice-over tell: “Body gets a breeze but inside is deserted!”

Under such trying circumstances Afeefa’s father sent her to a relative’s home in Delhi. Shot of the flying tricolor national flag is soon confronted by shots of public outcry against police brutality. Posters by protestors read “Azaadi”, “Stop Hate Politics” etc. Her state of mind is drowned in deep pain as she couldn’t shy away from the brewing troubles elsewhere. The poet’s musing gives voice to an agonized Afeefa as Jagan Nath Azad’s *Ae Wadi-e-*



Kashmir is recited from her album that keeps her company: “Many more hearts become privy to your pain/ Many more minds realize your innate nobility/ O Valley of Kashmir”. The film’s credit lines are embedded with a ticking sound of the clock, loud and provoking, conveying a premonition that time may explode anytime, or the heartbeat may stop, both of which doesn’t augur well for the democratic fabric of the nation.

☞ **Mr. Manoj Barpujari is a National Award winning Film Critics and a Member of FIPRESCI-India, based in Guwahati.**