

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Contest 2022: Winner of 2nd Best Critique Award

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Locating *Mayurakshi* between Mourning and Melancholia



Introduction

Underneath the terrains of our present runs a river of possibilities. A flash of experience, and we level our eyes, behold our future through each of its drops – a prism of memories. Such is the motif one tunes in to in Atanu Ghosh’s critically acclaimed Bengali film *Mayurakshi* (2017). The movie delicately transcripts the dynamics between an octogenarian man named Sushobhon Roychowdhury (Soumitra Chatterjee), diagnosed with dementia and his middle-aged son Arjoneel/Nilu (Prosenjit Chatterjee), coming to terms with his father’s neurological ailment. In this disease’s disruptive flow, longings emerge afresh in the ebb and tide of frayed memories, and the barrage between the past and the present is flooded through.

Sushobhon is depicted as a brilliant and idealistic erstwhile professor of History, a receptacle of varied knowledge and interests, and a deep source of inspiration for his son. Again, Arjoneel is a professionally thriving, worldly-wise man who is considerate and profoundly sensitive. The former lives in Kolkata, while the latter is settled in Chicago and comes to Kolkata on a short leave to treat Sushobhon’s recent medical deterioration. Much like the many over-the-shoulder shots of the film where one of the father-son duo is framed by the other’s out-of-focus back, their love for each further rounds the world of each. If Arjoneel is the only thing that Sushobhon looks forward to in his “shrunked” [sic] life, then Sushobhon’s presence is discernible in

every voice-over thought guiding Arjoneel in his. As the father and son look at each other through their bespectacled eyes, an exchange of outlooks and roles ensues in the 102 minutes of the movie. This essay argues that centring on Arjoneel, the film dithers in the gossamer screen between a concrete structure of mourning and an intangible one of melancholia to cinematically depict Arjoneel's negotiation with grief.

A Deluge of Loss and Mourning

Once close and known, now no more is what unsettles – what one mourns. Arjoneel, thus, is at a loss when in an oxbow turn of his life, he finds his intellectually gifted father dissipating amidst the markers of dementia. Through Soumitra's fine-grained acting emerges an exhausted father who breathes slowly and heavily, pivots and anchors his gaze labouredly, and carries out his tasks in a stiff, faltering and ungainly manner. This father confuses his son's return from Chicago with that from Lucknow two decades earlier.

The attrition that Sushobhon embodies is one he fears and tries to resist. Thus, his refusal to use a wheelchair at the hospital, where he is admitted for specific medical examinations, is a determination to walk autonomously, at least as long as possible. Yet, his losses are physiognomic and emotional, for his circumstances make him isolated. So, he panics about being left alone, asking his housekeeper Mallika (Sudipta Chakraborty) to stay close by, and helplessly pleads Arjoneel to “not forget” – taking him back to their house from the hospital, but at large, him. At times songs like “Amar Bhanga Pother Ranga Dhulaye”, connoting the inevitability of loss, play in the background; at others, Sushobhon recites the self-elegiac farewell poem “Peyechhi Chhuti”, making dementia if not synonymous with, then a premonition of demise.

Sushobhon's angst about his fragile condition ripples in Arjoneel too. Thus, even as he ignores his cousin's comments about the senility that commonly accompanies old age, he is unable to pass by a male hobo as old as his father lying senseless on the street without sparing a moment of ruing glance – all

precisely rendered by Prosenjit's reserved and subdued performance.

Loss peeks through the entire doiled length of the film in a layered manner, creating a general atmosphere of grieving. The newspaper pages that Sushobhon, perhaps prompted by his advancing loss of concentration, refuses to peruse are pages that daily enumerate political polarisations, violence, and injustice, conferring no dearth of things to mourn. One is left to measure scattered events of easy human goodness (like Mallika voluntarily decorating the house with flowers to welcome Sushobhon on his return from the hospital) against the vast spread of social depravity. Self-serving stipulations are laid out for every act of kindness (and often in exchange). Thus, if Arjoneel's cousin offers to ask after Sushobhon once Arjoneel returns to Chicago regularly, it is not without slipping a soft copy of his biodata with aspirations of securing employment abroad. This is depicted not only as a malady of the ‘modern’ and posh areas of Kolkata but an ailment that also seems to afflict the dingy lanes of more ‘traditional’ and worn-out parts of the city where the foreign-settled Arjoneel is treated as a ticket to golden opportunities. Such an erosion of social virtues comes with a loss of innocence. Thus, Arjoneel, who helps the driver and the servant carry his luggage despite dissuasions, is also one who doesn't readily grant every wish of Mallika, for he knows the ways of the world.

The movie also touches upon the loss of and in a past era of Bengali cinema by naming the deceased wife of Sushobhon Aparna, which one immediately recognises as that given to Sharmila Tagore when she played the role of the beloved wife of Soumitra acting as Apu/Apurbo in *Apur Sansar* (1959), the last part of the Apu Trilogy cinematized by Satyajit Ray. This charges Sushobhon's fleeting mourning of his wife with the affective energy of Apu mourning his.

Often, the film assumes a self-reflective quality, becoming a commentary on the loss ingrained in the cinema medium, much like photography. Extending the propositions of the American philosopher Susan Sontag and the French

theorist Roland Barthes – both of whom underscore the tenuous connection between mourning and photography wherein photographs are posed as objects that necessarily capture what would one day be lost, only left to be mourned by those who continue to look at them – the kinematic supplementation that cinema brings to photography among others makes one conscious of the motion of life it records that would one day be lost in the stillness of death. Thus, every finger of Arjoneel that stretches itself to his father in a touch of gentle attentiveness, that cinematographer Soumik Halder's camera slowly closes up on, is a glint of proximity that is lined by the certainty that in time it would be doubted, either by Arjoneel's erasure from his father's memory or Sushobhon's death – whichever comes first. If Arjoneel had once drifted from his father by settling in Chicago, it is now his father who flows away more rapidly.

Yet, beyond coping with the impending loss of Sushobhon, the movie brings to the fore other personal losses in Arjoneel's life that he is forced to face and reconcile with. The background music, meaningfully put into place by the music director Debojyoti Mishra, that in a particular shot accompanies the resurfacing memory of one such loss for Arjoneel, in an instance of brilliant editing by Sujoy Dutta Ray, features in the next scene as a sound wave on his laptop screen flowing across the reflection of his head on it, perhaps symbolising the currents of his inner feelings. Thus, unlike his father's, his losses dwell within, not diagnosable under X-rays. Yet they remain transparent before the loving eyes of his father, who forgets Arjoneel's occupation but knows his inner emotion-scape, knows he's not well. Thus, holding the hand of his regressing father, Arjoneel is forced to face both past and present grief – a failed career in national cricket, two broken marriages, the homeless shelter of a mother, financial obligations, and a distant son.

In the film, Arjoneel's negotiation with the many layers of loss is structurally arranged in stages akin to those experienced by an individual in mourning, as proposed by psychological theorists like Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, David Kessler and Bill Flatt.

Thus, his initial *shock* about his father's condition and a temporary *denial* about it is soon followed by a state of *anger* where he blames the house help for the same, unduly accusing them of not interacting enough with Sushobhon. Again, his vexed longing to dissociate from his past and its failings makes him refuse to return to his former clean-shaven look. After that ensues a *bargaining* wherein, as if hoping to reverse his ailment, Arjoneel spends time with his father, ultimately informed by the *guilt* of not doing it very often despite knowing he means the world to Sushobhon. These stages, however, are porous. When Sushobhon continuously reminds his son of a hopeful possibility that Arjoneel knows he can no longer be, he snaps at him, telling a heart-breaking lie that again makes him remorseful. The demands of Arjoneel's life don't allow him to perform the rightful duty of staying with Sushobhon, pushing him towards a *depressive* phase, where he breaks down in the airport after abandoning his father following his discharge from the hospital. But the Austrian-British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein posits this as an enriching phase where one is strengthened by the *acceptance* of one's grief and life's ambivalent nature. Thus, Arjoneel's tears represent a cathartic moment conveying him to a stage of *growth* where, much like the central message of carefully selected songs like "Alpo Loiya Thaki" and "Tomar Mohabiswe Kichhu" that play in the film's background during various scenes, the loss is never far from the ray of hope. He repeats: "After all, tomorrow is another day!"

Sensing Lack, Casting Melancholia

If much is lost in life, then things there are that stay way too far – never known. The Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud differentiates mourning from melancholia; unlike the former, triggered by loss, the latter is activated by a haunting longing for what one lacks. Such is the symbolic import of Mayurakshi in the film.

Amidst Arjoneel's acute awareness of his losses, his father reminds him of a woman named Mayurakshi, Sushobhon's former student whom he deems to be an ideal companion for Arjoneel – someone his son had distanced and refused to marry

two decades back. To fulfil Sushobhon's wish to meet her once, Arjoneel decides to find her, embarking on a journey the camera closely follows.

An ideal, Mayurakshi is always at a removal, never appearing even in flashbacks, accessible only as an assemblage of others' verbal reminiscences about her. A pure soul, she's advanced as a caring woman capable of allaying Arjoneel's fears, staying close – someone who loved him. She promises all he lacks in his life. Mayurakshi stayed with her mother, the sole surviving parent she had, till her last days. She is what he fails to be. Mayurakshi lives afar now, happy in her own nuclear family. She has what he could have had; she is what will never be his, what he'll never know. Mayurakshi is Arjoneel's melancholia. She is a sacred covenant between the lonesome son and father, the idealistic backwater of their lives that keeps them going – “Remaining a perpetual possibility/[If o]nly in a world of speculation”, as the epigraph to the film reminds.

Conclusion

The movie thus concerns itself with exploring the inlays of the subtle loss and lack that frame the lives of the estranged and solitary son and father in particular and humans in general through the panoramic spread of the image of dementia. Within the crypts of our beings, between the banks of mourning and melancholia, flows a river of tentative longing – we call it life, and Atanu names it Mayurakshi.

Title: Mayurakshi

Year: 2017

Language: Bengali

Direction, Story, Screenplay: Atanu Ghosh

Production: Firdausul Hasan and Probal Halder

Cinematography: Soumik Halder

Editing: Sujoy Dutta Ray

Music: Debojyoti Mishra

Cast: Prosenjit Chatterjee, Soumitra Chatterjee, Sudipta Chakraborty, Indrani Haldar, Gargi Roychowdhury

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