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Visual Apparatus as Political Tool in Shahrukh Khan Chavada's *Kayo Kayo Colour*

Shahrukh Khan Chavada's film *Kayo Kayo Colour*, which debuted at the Rotterdam Film Festival last year and continues its prolific festival run, traces a day in the life of an ordinary Muslim family in Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Through the film we see this Indian Muslim family's struggles and aspirations to reach for their dreams and to escape the invisibilizing walls of the ghetto, but a sudden event in India's recent socio-political history puts a spanner in the works. The children Ruba and Faiz learn lessons about Sunita Williams, the Indian American astronaut - it is another matter though that their circumstances do not allow them a break from the walled-in ghetto. Gasping under a low paying job, the father of the children decides that he wants the freedom of driving an autorickshaw, which is like going from the frying pan into the fire, but with a little deft planning and investment it would pay dividends later. The family wants to end this socioeconomic slavery and move on after the Gujarat riots, with greener pastures for the children. But even as they want to be a part of the booming Indian economy, ideas like 'Vibrant Gujarat' are not easily available to those marginalized in mainstream India.

The film uses novel visual strategies to make its points about Indian Muslims and

their relationship with the larger majority who are implied as the audience of the film. The title itself '*Kayo Kayo Colour*' ('Which Colour?') alludes to not just a game being played by children in their post-Gujarat riots Muslim ghetto but also signifies Chavada's visual strategy vis a vis the depiction - or rather the non-depiction or invisibilities - of Muslims in contemporary Indian films and popular imagination. In the game in this purposely filmed in black and white film, the children look for particular colours, and a child quibbles that the colour red is actually maroon. It is a distinction we will never know. At one point earlier, the colour of two roosters is discussed - "the orange one" - both of which seem the same to us. This is a hint that we may never be able to see the lives of these Muslim people in full colour, detail or nuance. The choice to shoot sans colour, while talking of colours, is a political act which signifies that it's not the Muslim lives which are devoid of colour but that the problem lies in the woefully inadequate visual apparatus of mainstream India.

'Children Playing Games', a well known painting by the 16th C Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel may as well be another title for *Kayo, Kayo Colour*. Portraying the lives of its characters in gradually unfolding detail, the film seems to owe a debt to Bruegel in its minutely observed details. His 'Children Playing Games' is a painting of scores of children who are up to mischief in literally every corner and surface area of the canvas which depicts scenes of barely controlled anarchy in carefully detailed studies. The painting is charged with political meaning and has also been interpreted as a satirical chastisement for adults who are deemed little better than children. Bruegel paints the children with great relish, and in all their mischievous glory. It must also be pointed out that Bruegel's little girls across his paintings are mischievous little tykes - don't be fooled by their prim and proper headdresses!

Kayo Kayo Colour, in its assertion of its characters' humanity with carefully observed detail is not too far from the point either. And don't be fooled by the headdresses, as Bruegel too might have asserted. The girls and women in this film are certainly no victims, despite the presence of patriarchy. In fact mainstream India's apparent concern for the supposedly invisibilized burqa clad Muslim woman is addressed through the beauty of the women's prayers, and through their labors and their conversations being intimately documented. Muslim lives matter, the director Shahrukh Khan Chavada is saying, as he portrays them in languorous and poetic detail, as political a rendition today as Chantal Akerman's radical and subversive film *Jeanne Dielman* which documents a woman's life and domestic work in painstaking detail, the visuals rebelling against widely accepted norms of what constitutes engaging cinematic matter.

Similarly in the Islamic school or madarsa (where the young children get their lessons in the Quran) we see an entire stream of adorable Assalam Walleikums (Islamic greetings) - almost a subversive act in a country whose vast cinematic repertoire avoids such depictions. A very deliberate camera pan brings the Holy Quran to the foreground and leaves it at the center of the frame. What do you find fundamentalist here, seems to be the question posed to the viewer, as the filmmaker makes visible what is

usually invisibilized in mainstream Indian filmmaking - the presence of Muslims. Women don burqas and then sit down in beautifully tranquil spaces to say their prayers. Suffused with poetry, these shots seem to question the Islamophobic tenor and rhetoric of majoritarian India.

Apart from being colour blind or oblivious to the beauty and nuances of Muslim lives, the vision of mainstream India is also blinkered, that is, it lacks peripheral vision. In other words mainstream or popular imagination in contemporary India is deliberately half blind, and this is seen through one of the most visually and politically subversive facets of the film's cinematographic vocabulary. Contemporary film goers are mostly used to the 16:9 Widescreen format of aspect ratio, while some might remember the television screens of yore as fixed mostly to a squarish 4:3 ratio, which to contemporary eyes, looks as if the sides of normal vision have been lopped off. Chavada makes a choice to use the now defunct TV ratio or 4:3, which makes the characters look deliberately boxed-in or entrapped in their already colourless world.

As if this lack of peripheral vision were not enough, towards the last third of the film we find ourselves suddenly engulfed in complete darkness corresponding to sheer blindness of human vision. Thus the film's visual conceit of ophthalmological metaphors continues. We do not know if the black screen alludes to another catastrophic calamity of the magnitude of the Gujarat riots. This turns out to be a power cut, and the screen remains in pitch darkness for a significant duration like a black joke hanging on all of us - the characters of the film as well as the nonplussed audience. This episode of temporary blindness signifies the sudden legislation of the 'Demonetisation' move of 2016.

However, after this event the frame changes to the wider 16:9 screen ratio and signifies a return to a more "normal" or complete vision. But who has gained complete vision? The assumed audience of the film which brought back the makers of the demonetisation catastrophe to power again? Perhaps not.

After the event of demonetisation or the black screen, the hitherto lopped off peripheral vision has returned along with the lead character Ruba's sudden return of the viewer's gaze right into the camera, which punctures the chimera of the film's fictionality. The return of this angry and accusatory gaze of the boxed up or so far incarcerated-in-TV-ratio character's gaze is haunting. "I see you," she seems to say to the mainstream Indian audience all too clearly, while she remains invisible to them, with or without her burqa. The film ends at Demonetisation but indeed the rot has spread and contaminated more than was foreseen by many Hindus who continue to look away when their Muslim brethren are attacked. You did this to us, says Ruba's gaze. And Demonetisation has come for all Indians, and not just Indian Muslims.

The film's elaborate visual conceit of ophthalmological metaphors points to how the majority of Indians are still willfully blind to their Muslim brethren, not just to beauty and nuance in Muslim lives but also blind to the most despicable and heinous atrocities as well as the slow burning massacres of Muslim dreams and aspirations performed in their name. *Kayo Kayo Colour* quietly seethes, and not without good reason. In contemporary India the ghettoisation of Muslims is not even just limited to the urban poor, and we, the "mainstream", hear stories everyday of systemic bias against Muslims, be it working class Muslims being brutally attacked or well to do Muslims not being allowed to rent or buy houses in Hindu areas. The Indian majority is complicit in the visually and morally bankrupt mainstream narrative, buttressed by popular or mainstream media, and this powerful debut serves as an antithesis to shrill and prejudiced depictions of Indian Muslims while marking the presence of an upcoming auteur.

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