Centenary Tribute: Uttam Kumar

Rima Ash

Nayak and the Star Culture: How Alienation and Existentialism Work Beyond Stardom

"Film star involved in brawl…. Bengal's popular matinee idol Mr. Arindam Mukherjee involved in an unsavoury incident…" The day Arindam was going to receive a national award for his achievements he encountered a scandalous piece of news that could bring his image into disrepute. Although he shows a disdainful attitude towards it, the matter kept weighing on his mind. His continuous concern throughout his journey shows how he becomes anxious about it. A person who is going to be awarded why so anxious about a scandal? An actor who had achieved everything associated with his star identity- what was pushing him into a state of anxiety? In the film industry, success is not achieved solely by an actor's skills; there are several interconnected factors, and the star embodies those factors and maintains a balance between them to sustain his image. Consequently, this star identity gradually becomes inseparable from their original self. If it is true that this image cannot be separated from that individual's personality, why does Arindam

become anxious about that trivial news? This article will try to explore Arindam's crisis that simultaneously belongs to his star image.

Aditi: "How does it clearly feel to be so famous?"

Arindam: "Feels fine. Splendid!"

The film, *Nayak* (1966), reveals how a film star is concerned about his fame, popularity, and carefully nurtures his public image. It is a fabulous experience, as Arindam asserts, which includes several distinct features like success, recognition, widespread respect, and admiration— and posits them in the realm of stardom. But stardom does not solely come with attainments, also creates conflicts, which can be observed through Arindam's character. The iconic dream sequence shows the hero hopping around in a land of currencies all alone. As far as he can see, millions of currencies are scattered around in a desert-like pattern, and those currencies were flying all around like a dust storm. Arindam was extremely happy as he owned this land, as he was splended by his enormous recognition. But his happiness transformed into fear as soon as the storm passed. No one was there other than Arindam, and a ringing telephone started chasing him. And finally, the telephone appeared in a skeletal hand holder; one after another, skeletal hands surrounded him. He is unable to escape; it is a trap showing how he has been trapped by the pressure of public demand in the industry. And at the end of this sequence, he sinks into the quicksand of currencies— depicting the dissonance underlying his success.

"… but I knew I had sunk now in his estimation..."

The moment Arindam refuses to participate in the political rally with his childhood friend, Viresh, he reveals his fear of being a star figure. They have had significant influence over ordinary people in society, not only through the characters they performed on screen, but also through their appearance, lifestyle, fashion, and personal stories, which have been consumed by society. Through media texts like advertising, film promotion, magazines, and even critics, their personality has been created by capitalism, so that the industry can use this image to organize the market. The industry usually uses this stardom merely as a promise or guarantor of profit; it can be considered a security deposit against large investment (King, 2010). They are not allowed to be involved in whatever they want; there is a continuous fear of losing the star image, which drives them to safeguard their identity. To eliminate this fear, they adopt a highly scripted and rehearsed way of living, gradually alienating themselves and living an ornamented lifestyle. In this way, they may lose their inner self, but ultimately help to bridge industrial production and audience consumption, and play a vital role for the overall benefit of capitalism.

"I wish I hadn't changed so much…"

This film examines a continuous conflict between self-consciousness and self-alienation, the way Arindam dives into his

charismatic image. There is a fantasy that the star holds a very powerful position in contemporary capitalism, allowing individuals to freely express themselves and letting them believe that they have succeeded through their uniqueness. King argues that the contemporary star system has changed completely from its traditional form, as in the earlier system, a star was recognized by their performance, but in contemporary capitalism, one gets popularity through visibility and appearance, not because of the character they are playing; stars' personal lives have also become part of the attraction. This is why capitalism treats stars differently, prioritizing their individuality, which supposedly gives freedom, allowing the star to focus on it (King, 2010). In a capitalist structure, a star has been used just as a product, which can generate value and get regularly offered work to those who have the potential to hold stardom. Stardom is not received in a completely random manner; instead, it is judged through the success of that actor and the ability to contribute to the consumption culture with inevitable interactions with media texts. They are bound to perform for their self-presentation to sustain their star persona, respond to public demand, help them succeed professionally, and ensure profit for the industry, but this comes with tension. Success does not mean achieving enormous recognition; it also contains anxieties about failure, loss of popularity, or dissatisfaction, which raise the fear of loneliness, instability, and disappointment. Despite being aware of this fear, they choose to embrace the media-generated false image impetuously and sink into the process of dehumanization, alienating their own self and leaving themselves in a crisis with their existence.

Towards Metamorphosis and Alienation

Arindam, as a star, readily accepts this imputed external image as presentable in the industry, but what will happen if these images are withdrawn from the star persona? Will he still be recognized in the same way if he can no longer perform the functions through which he was valued? Marx's general idea of genuine human labour involves an individual's imagination and creativity; in contrast, capitalist labour takes away the worker's control over his own physical and mental energy and imposes an externally mechanized force (Marx, 1844). The capitalist system values the worker while they can provide labour; once their capacity disappears, the worker can be discarded. It shows the dimension of how society dehumanizes Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's story, *The Metamorphosis*, after losing his economic usefulness. In a literal sense, metamorphosis enacts a loss of self, an estrangement from his human existence. Gregor's embodiment of self-alienation happens in the way he is compelled to accept his hated job as a travelling salesman to support his bankrupt family. He finds his job

joyless and unbearable but is bound to this sacrificial service solely by economic necessity. This job does not belong to him, and neither does the money he earned through his labour. When one works for its own sake, it offers satisfaction, as it allows the creative freedom of the worker—the factor Marx describes to differentiate human productivity from animals. Gregor's work is not only uncreative, but it is totally determined by external need (Almohtabi, n.d.).

Gregor's metamorphosis into a gigantic specimen of vermin presents his dissatisfaction with his work. His work appears as a burden on his life, as it discreetly removed all his creative capacities and spoiled his psychic competencies. His metamorphosis is not an external punishment; rather, it is the physical manifestation of his mental condition after losing his own identity, which precisely corresponds with the concept of wage labour in the context of a capitalist framework (Sokel, 1983). A Marxist perspective of capitalism suggests four formulated structures of self-alienation, which are all closely connected with Gregor's transformation. The first kind of alienation intersects with the separation of the worker from the product of his labour, as Gregor is completely unknown to the work he does. Marx's explanation of factory labour suggests that as workers put more labour into producing an object, the object becomes more valuable at the expense of the labourer's devaluation (Marx, 1844). Gregor, being a travelling salesman, is merely an intermediary or a mechanized representative for the products, with nothing personally to do with them. Consequently, his labour can easily appear alien to the product for which he performs his labour. Marx's another explanation of self-alienation also closely resembles Gregor, as his routine work is essentially dictated by external forces—constantly changing trains, meeting strangers, pressure of business, and a lack of control over his actions—successfully alienating him from the process of production (Sokel, 1983). Marx's argues that, in the chain of factory production, capitalism externalizes labour from the worker—they have less control over what they do, where they go, or how they spend their energy (Marx, 1998). Thus, Gregor's labour not only appears as an alien to that product, but rather becomes a servant of it.

The third type of alienation includes the dehumanization factor of capitalism. This is the most important to illustrate Gregor's situation, as it separates the human being from its core identity. One sudden morning, he realized that he had transformed into a vermin, which literally signifies his alienation from himself. But it did not solely constitute Gregor's actual alienation; it already existed within Gregor, in the way he is involved in work as a salesman only because of economic necessity, to bail his family out of his father's debt. Gregor hates his job, wants to escape it, and is inextricably bound to it only to maintain his family's condition. Thus, his labour is not for self-fulfilment, merely instrumental. The extrinsic nature of his work transformed Gregor's body into an animalistic condition—the lowest form of human contempt, which his capitalist existence had already imposed upon him (Sokel, 1983). The last form of alienation happens through the social relationships he had in a capitalist society. Marx sees humans

as fundamentally social beings, constituted through societal connections and with the world around them, but capitalism weakens genuine human connection (Marx, 1844). Gregor's alienation from his family corresponds with the concept of rejecting man's existence as a social being in a capitalist framework. It shows the exploitative nature of capitalism, which gradually denies Gregor Samsa's existence once he loses his economic usefulness (Almohtabi, n.d.).

Gregor's overnight transformation into a gigantic insect and the gradual denial of his existence articulate how the capitalist economic framework devalues manpower as a machine, depriving him of all forms of his humanity, and ultimately alienates him from his humanness (Sokel, 1983). This transition is also boldly featured with the existential anxiety of a star figure. Satyajit Ray's exploration of *Nayak* positions a star in a capitalist industry, leading towards Arindam Mukherjee's crisis of identity, with a parallel point of view of Gregor Samsa's alienation in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Though the socioeconomic condition of Arindam does not completely match Gregor's position, the crisis of one's existence in a capitalist society remains the same. The capitalist power system uses Gregor's labour merely as an economic instrument. Likewise, Arindam's significance functions as a form of economic guarantee for the industry, as he indicates his own economic value by saying, …I am in it, isn't it enough?..."

How does Gregor's alienation resemble Arindam Mukherjee?

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* precisely provides a conceptual framework for Marx's idea of alienated labour, which can also be applied as a critical framework for Arindam Mukherjee's crisis in *Nayak*. Although the traditional Marxian formulation of alienation developed in the context of factory production, Arindam experiences alienation as he gradually indulges in his stardom by rejecting his inner self. The more he resonates with his star identity, the more he becomes alien to himself. Arindam, even though he is one of the biggest stars of the Bengali film industry, is also conditioned by external forces. His fear of losing his image, or audience acceptability, divorces him from his core identity. "I mustn't get involved in this kind of thing…Why can't you understand my position?..." The way he refuses to join his friend, Viresh, clearly shows how he separated himself from his childhood friend. Their private life, lifestyle, fashion, and even emotions become part of the projection, collectively representing themselves as a personal brand. With higher intensities of projection, the attachment between the individuals and their idolized star appears more concrete. Rather than performance skills, skills of presenting oneself become the dominant form of employment (King, 9). Under the pressure of self-presentation, Arindam gradually dominates his individual identity beneath his enormous popularity to ensure market acceptance.

Shankar Da: "...A film actor is nothing but a puppet. A doll. A puppet in the hands of the director, a puppet in the hands of the cameraman, and the sound recordist. Then there's the man who cuts the film and sticks it together again, a puppet in his hands too..."

Marxian formulation of alienated labour suggests that alienation occurs when

human activity and its product confront the individual as something external and independent of the self (Marx,1844) — associates with Arindam's experience of alienation. As a screen performer, every movement, gesture, and bodily expression an actor embodies is largely determined and regulated by others, subject to the control of the director, cinematographer, and even the sound recordist, with a limited scope for individual creative ideation. And the final product is constructed through an industrial process. Arindam's control over his own performance does not remain entirely with him. Consequently, the final cinematic image he confronts externalizes his labour and commodifies his appearance. Once labour is transformed into a commodity, the worker's value is no longer determined solely by his labour — Arindam's recognizable image, visibility, and audience reception become inevitable components of his exchange value. Since star value is measured by commodity-centered politics of visibility rather than by their craftsmanship, Arindam, as a star, becomes subject to alienation from the system.

A star is a manifestation of the process of supply and demand. Their existence is closely tied to mass consumption, and their value depends on marketability. Arindam's continuous anxiety about the audience reveals how they play an important role in a star's life. A star is a puppet to the audience as well. They have been considered a cultural phenomenon, not only because of their screen presence; their personal life and exceptional characteristics are also subject to the audience. Their visibility creates the bond between the audience and the star. On the other hand, stars also like to share their personal lives with the audience, preferring to be visible to them. In the scene from *Nayak*, when Aditi and Arindam are chatting in the dining car during their train journey, the moment when the train stops at a crowded platform, people start peeping at them; Arindam's character shows how he enjoys being seen. The audience has an enormous interest in their favoured star; they are immensely curious about the star's life and love to gossip about them. And the star persona enjoys being the subject of public attention. But the audience plays a very contradictory role in stardom. Although they are the actual admirers of the star figure, they hold the power to alienate the star. To describe the audience's contradictory position, Arindam says, "You know what the trouble is? You can never tell with the public..." A star's value depends on audience preference. If a star persona fails to receive public acceptance, can create the fear of losing identity in the mass market.

The audience is a salient component in sustaining market demand. A star's rise and fall are derived from audience reception. Rather than cinematic representation, through magazine advertisements, photographs, signatures, and public appearances, the industry creates a star's sacred image, which helps them to acquire Star Aura. To reinforce

the relationship with the audience, stars try to actively engage with them and let people observe their lives. As they know they are continuously overseen by others, stars start presenting their own personalities and alienate their own selves. Thus, their individual personality, by virtue of their 'superhuman qualities', separates them from ordinary people (Dyer, 1998). Consequently, in the process of self-presenting, Arindam perpetually tries to hide this suffering, anxiety, and even his past life, which can impact negatively on his star image. “Listen. I mustn't get involved in this kind of thing. It's too risky....” It conditions his way of living, as it stagnates his idolized figure. That fear is vividly demonstrated in the dialogue of Arindam: “Nonsense! Bloody public! Whimsical. Wipe 'em all out.....”

The film Nayak exhibits a clear transition from traditional acting to its contemporary form with an intense conflict between Mukunda Lahiri, the senior actor, and Arindam Mukherjee. In the case of Arindam's anxiety about losing his existence, Mukunda Lahiri uncovers the truth behind star identity in both ways—firstly, in King's argument, he distinguishes contemporary actors from their traditional form based on craftsmanship. He says that traditionally, actors are recognized by their 'exceptionally well-crafted portrayal of a complex character' (King, 2010), which includes individuals' skills and abilities for character establishment. Mukunda Lahiri, as a traditional actor, was deeply devoted to the principle of method acting, where physical behaviour and vocal delivery are much more important. But contemporary actors are featured for their visibility rather than skills, which restricts them with the anxiety of market demand. As a contemporary actor, Arindam criticised Mukunda Lahiri's acting technique as outdated, accepting being exploited for marketability. Another way of showing anxiety about being alienated is curated by Mukunda Lahiri—the process through which his character shows how the industry replaced him with new faces. “I know what can happen if three films flop in a row...” Ray portrays Mukunda Lahiri in an authoritative position in the film industry when Arindam was a newcomer. The industry, in which he contributed greatly through his performance, alienates him after his three flopped pictures. “Remember me?... A good many can’t recall....” As the industry wipes out the existence of such an artist, Mukunda Lahiri creates Arindam’s anxiety about being alienated.

“It's all piled up in here. There's nobody I can tell it all to.”

Gregor's alienation from his family as soon as he transforms into a gigantic vermin explicitly resembles the anxiety of Arindam. Gregor's alienation from social relationships shows how the capitalist framework gradually weakens genuine human connection (Almohtabi, n.d.). Arindam's journey incorporates Gregor into its narrative as an

integral part of his story, as he says, " There's nobody I can tell it all to..." Arindam lacks someone with whom he can openly share his sufferings. He lost his parents in childhood; Shankar Da and Viresh were the only people he considered close to him. However, he loses both of them in the process of being promoted as a star. "All those who flock around me now, the moment I start slipping, those bastards..." By this line, Arindam indicates the extrinsic nature of capitalism. Gregor's story establishes how capitalism gradually denies his existence after losing his economic usefulness. Arindam is conscious of the precariousness of his position. Knowing that a single failure could cause him to be abandoned, he continues to maintain his pretence and intensifies his struggle with his own existence.

Thus, at its core, this reflects how Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* presents stardom as a contradictory condition which simultaneously produces extraordinary admiration and equally vulnerability. Therefore, ultimately, Ray's film suggests that the greatest crisis of the star is not the loss of the fame itself but the difficulty of distinguishing the person from the commodity created in his name. Arindam is surrounded by recognition but deprived of genuine intimacy. He is constantly seen, but his individuality is rarely known. His journey therefore becomes a journey from the public image towards the buried self. So if Kafka's Gregor asks what remains of a human being when economic usefulness disappears, Ray's Arindam asks a related question on the other side: What remains of the individual when economic value becomes inseparable from identity? *Nayak* leaves this question unresolved, making the film's explorations of stardom simultaneously a study of labour, commodification and the fragile construction of the modern self.

References

Dyer, R. (1998). *Stars*. British Film Institute.

King, B. (2010). Stardom, celebrity, and the money form. The Velvet Trap,65,7-19

Kafka, F.(1915). *The Metamorphosis* (D. Wyllie, Trans.).

Sokel, W. H. (1983). From Marx to myth: The structure and function of self-alienation in Kafka's Metamorphosis, The Literary Review, 26(4). 485-495.

Almohtabi,A. (n.d.). Vermin in tears: A Marxist reading of *Kafka's Metamorphosis.*

Marx, K.(1844). Estranged Labour. Marxists Internet Archive. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm

Filmography

Ray, S. (Director). (1966). *Nayak* (Film). R.D.Banshak & Co.

Rima Ash is a student Film Studies.