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## Shyam Benegal's *Zubeidaa*: memory as 'voice'

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The demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 and the Mumbai riots that followed in its wake in January 1993 motivated Shyam Benegal to respond to his feelings for the minority community. His empathy for the minority was triggered mainly by the violence he was personally witness to at the crowded streets of Tardeo where his office stands. He saw a Muslim bakery being set on fire by an angry mob. His response brought in its wake three films in quick succession – *Mammo*, *Sardari Begum* and *Zubeidaa*, a family trilogy relating to the stories and journeys of three women from Muslim families. All three films defined Benegal's concern with marginalized women. The three central women characters in these films were marginalized thrice over – one because being Muslim, they were part of a minority group in India; two, as Muslim women, they were a minority-within-minority within their own communal group; and three, because they were women, *per se*. Within the first area of marginalization, they were targets of oppression that is the fate of Muslim women by virtue of the ideologies and philosophies of Muslim faith. Though these three areas of the oppression of Muslim women come across lucidly, subtly yet strongly in all three films, it is not the victimization that interested Benegal but rather, the strength and the power that lay hidden within these women, waiting to be tapped, drawn out and executed across the span of their respective lives. The aim of this paper on Shyam Benegal's *Zubeidaa* is to show how the filmmaker has made imaginative, aesthetic and emotional use of 'memory' reconstructed from erased history as 'voice.' Memory reconstructed from archives like a family album, a forgotten/hidden roll of film containing a song-dance sequence, diaries written by the woman whose strident and vocal 'voice' has been reconstructed from the past. Oral accounts offered by the woman's mother Faiyyazi to her grandson Riyaz, reveals *Zubeidaa*'s 'voice-as-it-was' in the present. It tries to discover how cinema as language, medium and agency, makes it possible to reconstruct erased memory of the past through the memories of people in the present and agencies of the past.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 and the Mumbai riots that followed in its wake in January 1993 motivated Shyam Benegal to respond to his feelings for the minority community. His empathy for the minority was triggered mainly by the violence he was personally witness to at the crowded streets of Tardeo where his office stands. He saw a Muslim bakery being set on fire by an angry mob. His response brought in its wake three films in quick succession – *Mammo*, *Sardari Begum* and *Zubeidaa*, a family trilogy relating to the stories and journeys of three women from Muslim families. All three films defined Benegal's concern with marginalized women. The three central women characters in these films were marginalized thrice over – one because being *Muslim*, they were part of a minority group in India; two, as *Muslim women*, they were a minority-within-minority within their own communal group; and three, because they were *women*, per se. Within the first area of marginalization, they were targets of oppression that is the fate of Muslim women by virtue of the ideologies and philosophies of Muslim faith. Though these three areas of the oppression of Muslim women come across lucidly, subtly yet strongly in all three films, it is not the victimization that interested Benegal but rather, the strength and the power that lay hidden within these women, waiting to be

tapped, drawn out and executed across the span of their respective lives.

#### *The Trilogy*

*Mammo*: As one watches *Mammo* (1994) over and over again, one's faith in cinema being able to question the Partition and its decimation of the Indian family in retrospect is redeemed. It is also about childhood and innocence and about the alienation of a woman when she is widowed in a land that she can never consider her home. It is about the reunion of sisters divided by the Partition. It is also about loneliness and old age and about the strong resources that are inherent in a woman, resources she can draw upon when she needs to.

*Mammo* is a different cup of tea from other middle-aged women. Her weakness is her brutal forthrightness on the one hand and her active involvement in other people's worries on the other. But this is also her strong point. She evokes the wrath of her grand-nephew by springing a surprise birthday party for him but also helps out the battered domestic by beating up her alcoholic, wife-battering husband. She questions her affluent sister's ethics in having appropriated their portion of the family wealth. Finally, when she is dragged away from her sister's place and put into a train chugging away to Pakistan, her anguish is something we can identify with because by then, we are absolutely on her side. Since she

is packed off cruelly to a country that is still 'foreign' to her because she has overstayed her term of stay, Mammo arrives many years later and this time round, legalizes her stay by having the strapping young grand-nephew register a certificate of her 'death' in India. They cannot send her off ever again.

*Sardari Begum* (1996) shows Shyam Benegal raising questions about Sardari's brutal repression of her daughter's love life. He does not make any attempt to whitewash her character as that of an ideal woman, much less the ideal mother. As a mother, Sardari is fleshed out as a very selfish woman who imposes her own ambitions on her ordinary and unwilling daughter, denying her thereby, the life of love and marriage she so painfully desires. Sardari is loud, open and brash, defining her assertiveness, arrogance and confidence, much of which she uses to veil her diffidence and her emotional insecurity with Sakina's softness and submissive demeanour balances the mother's arrogance. On hindsight, Sardari's total domination of her daughter could be interpreted as *her* way of 'balancing out' the oppression and exploitation she suffered at her husband's hands. And we are also made to realise that Sakina's giving up her dreams of love and marriage was more because she loved her mother, than because she was afraid of her.

*Zubeidaa* is the third of the family trilogy presenting three woman-centric stories. It is a

period film set against the backdrop of Rajasthan around 1950-52 when India had just been declared a Democratic Republic with 550 princely states and a large Muslim population. The country was preparing for the first general elections and the princely states were clearly headed to a grand decline, a fascinating period both from political and social points of view (Datta 2003: 200). Khalid Mohamed collaborated on the project by writing the script based on the real-life story of his own mother.

#### *Aim*

The aim of this paper on Shyam Benegal's *Zubeida* is to show how the filmmaker has made imaginative, aesthetic and emotional use of 'memory' reconstructed from erased history as 'voice.' Memory reconstructed from archives like a family album, a forgotten or hidden reel of film containing a song-dance sequence, diaries written by the woman whose strident and vocal 'voice' has been reconstructed from the past. Oral accounts offered by the woman's mother Faiyyazi to her grandson Riyaz, reveals Zubeidaa's 'voice-as-it-was' in the present. It tries to discover how cinema as language, medium and agency, makes it possible to reconstruct erased memory of the past through the memories of people in the present and agencies of the past.

### *The Background*

The Maharaja of Jodhpur, Prince Hukam Singh, brought with him an aspiring starlet and established her as his second 'wife' in a mansion built for her to keep her distanced from his main family consisting of his wife, two little children and his brother. The Maharaja and this woman died together in an air crash soon after the two-seater craft took off on an election campaign. When he comes to solve the mystery that shrouded the life and death of a mother he has never known, the now-adult son Riyaz discovers that the very existence of this second woman in Hukam Singh's life has been erased completely from the official history of the royal family and from the memories of those within it.

It is said that Khalid Mohamed's mother was a starlet in the 1950s. She married Prince Hukam Singh of Jodhpur. Mohamed was brought up by his maternal grandmother in Bombay. He had been told that his mother had died in an accident. He was very small when he lost his mother and knew about her from fragments of information, mainly heard from first-person memories narrated by his grandmother. The oral histories triggered within him the desire to learn more about her, as a son and as an objective observer of a woman who dreamt of making it big in mainstream films but left everything for love that took her life instead. In return, she was rewarded with complete erasure both from

memory and from official history. *Zubeidaa* is the celluloid resurrection of this woman's life. She lived life on her own terms but lost, also on her own terms. For Mohamed, the autobiographical journey was a process of self-discovery in a certain sense of moving back into his mother's life; for Benegal, it offered the trappings of a grand romance with a tragic end (Datta 2003: 201). The historical element of the story offered the director an extra-aesthetic authority as stated by Lionel Trilling (1985) who says- "In the existence of every work of literature of the past, its historicity, its pastness is a factor of great importance. In certain cultures, the pastness of a work of art gives it an extra-aesthetic authority which is incorporated into its aesthetic power"(260).

*Zubeidaa* is said to be Benegal's costliest film before his most recent *Netaji – The Lost Hero*. It was made at a cost of Rs.4 crores (\$825,000.) It was difficult to find a producer willing to fund the film despite its twin mainstream attractions of Karisma Kapoor, one of the reigning stars of Hindi cinema playing the title role and A.R. Rahman scoring the music for the first time for a Benegal film. Mohamed and Benegal finally persuaded Farokh Ratonsey to produce the film. Karisma Kapoor agreed to sign for a price much lower than her normal market price. The place setting on location for *Zubeidaa* was Ram Niwas Mahal in Jaipur for the Jodhpur

segment in 1999. The walls of the original palace were re-worked to give them a touch of historical authenticity. The walls had been decorated and painted with intricate motifs, old sepia-tinted photographs of royal hunts were put up on the walls, and a portrait of the prince (the actor Manoj Bajpai who played the prince in the film) dominated one end of the room.

Benegal was attracted to the theme for two reasons: *one*, the sentimental ethos spontaneously generated by the subject through the search of a son for the memories of his mother; *two*, the challenge of recreating an era which Benegal had already handled in his earlier film *Bhumika* and the historical series *Bharat Ek Khoj* made for television. These two are intertwined and merge so completely that at the end of it all, the audience finds itself participating in the son's journey to fill in the missing gaps in his mother's life and death as much as it gets the opportunity of looking back at Hindi cinema as it existed in and around the 1950s through slices of Zubeidaa's growth from adolescence to womanhood.

With *Zubeidaa*, Benegal returned to the theme of the public and private faces of a woman protagonist he had examined in *Bhumika*. The film offers frequent echoes of some of his earlier heroines – Usha in *Bhumika*, Sardari in *Sardari Begum* and Zeenat in *Mandi*. All of them are women who

loved life, were spirited and strong-willed. Each of them has her individual destiny crossed by larger political forces. Collectively, they serve to remind the viewer that in many films of Benegal, the female point of view shapes the response of the audience (Datta 2003: 128). *Yashraj Films* distributed *Zubeidaa*. It was released simultaneously in India, the U.K. and other international territories. It ran for 12 weeks in U.K. alone where it grossed around 175,000 British Pounds. It has been screened widely at several film festivals and is marketed in VHS and DVD format internationally. *Zubeidaa* was shot within the incredibly short span of 50 days, on location in Pune and Jaipur with Rajan Kothari contributing to the lavish and beautiful cinematography.

### *The Film*

The narrative unfolds in bits and starts, through long flashbacks, gathered by Riyaz through Zubeidaa's diary that Fayyazi had kept hidden from him for all these years. The images form of collage through several agencies: (a) oral reminiscences of the dance director who knew Zubeida as a child and directed her for her first and last dance number for the film *Banjaran* that never saw the light of day; (b) the album of photographs and the film reel of the picturised dance gifted to Riyaz as an afterthought by an aged Mandira; (c) Mandira herself who fondly

recalls the early days when Zubeidaa filled the palace ambience with her joyful spirit of camaraderie; (d) Rose Davenport who knew and understood Zubeida more closely and much better than her own mother did.

Shocking revelations come from two sources: (i) the royal aide who is now caretaker of the royal palace that has been converted into a hotel, and (ii) the prince's alcoholic brother who oversees it. The royal aide tells Riyaz that Zubeidaa was a concubine who drove the prince to his death. The prince's brother denies that there ever was a younger princess, pointing to the complete erasure of Zubeidaa from the pages of royal history.

*Zubeidaa* offers a beautifully structured narrative that is neither linear nor circular but rather, a collage of sound, music, voice, photographs, image, visual, a film reel, interviews and dialogue interspersed with long flashbacks actualizing the information that is being gleaned by Riyaz about his mother. There are two narrative structures at work here: *one*, the structure of the present with Riyaz undertaking his journey into his mother's past; and *two*, the past that consists of events and incidents that the 'present' unfolds. Riyaz functions as narrator and character at the same time, his life in the film spanning from being an infant to the time when he sits back and watches the only film reel his young and beautiful mother shot for. As narrator, he describes his mother's past

from the smaller narratives that come to him. As character, he is more of a listener, a documentarist, a recordist, an observer and at times, a commentator who finally discovers that at the end of it all, he has not been able to fathom the mystique of his mother. Towards the end of the film, a much-tried and baffled son asks his grandmother a crucial question – *aakhir ammi chahti kyat hi?* (After all, what did Ammi want?) which perhaps, is a psychological and emotional extension of the Freudian question – “what does a woman want?”

The structure of the film is an echo of a similar line Benegal adopted for *Sardari Begum*. But there are differences. In *Sardari Begum*, the narrator did not even exist in Sardari's life. Though Tehzeeb, the young journalist is related to Sardari, she learns of the relationship only when she steps into Sardari's house as the latter's funeral procession is being readied. Tehzeeb's narrator-role is more or less like the narration that would fit into any investigative journalist's daily line of work. She is in no way emotionally involved in her search into Sardari's past. Secondly, Tehzeeb sources her information only through interviews and *Sardari Begum* – both the character and the film, do not permit for multiple narratives and agencies the way *Zubeidaa* does. There is an element of distancing in *Sardari* though it begins to narrow down as Tehzeeb begins to

uncover and put together layers of little-known facts and events of Sardari's life. In *Zubeidaa*, Riyaz's entire quest into his mother's past is grounded in the very premise that Zubeidaa is his mother and as her son, he knows nothing about her life or about her death, a secret fiercely guarded by her mother and his grandmother Fayyazi. A close relative distanced from her subject through age, culture, environment and profession played out in *Sardari Begum* is defined by a distance and a sense of alienation structurally denied to a son gleaning things about his own mother, never mind that she died when he was a little boy.

What attracted Benegal to the story, by his own admission, was the search of a young man for his mother through the people who knew her and the belongings she left behind... But what is fascinating about her is that none of those who knew her could actually give a complete picture of her...she remained an enigma whose memories couldn't quite be grasped completely. There is always a piece missing from the big puzzle, or a segment that slips out of one's grasp just when it seems within reach. What unfolds is an intriguing and multi-layered personality built bit by bit yet never building up into a cohesive and complete whole. But this incomplete, fragmented enigma is precisely what *Zubeidaa*'s mystique is all about. Benegal has taken utmost care in recreating the look of the

bygone era and the effort is praiseworthy. Despite the flashbacks, the narrative sustains our interest and attention till the film comes to an end.

The story of her life is put together in a collage of events where the past telescopes into the present, fusing the two time-periods, from people who knew her as a young woman and from diaries she had kept. The metaphor of the red scarf floating across an azure blue sky sets the tone of the film. There are strong influences of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* where the true character of Kane is unfolded only after his death. With *Zubeidaa*, Benegal succeeds in bridging the gap between the mainstream audience and his own niche audience because the film fulfils the demand of a greedy audience and also sustains the aesthetic beauty of storytelling through cinema. The close bonding between the grandmother and grandson is understated till it reaches the climactic end of the film. As they watch the same film clip – the only one – of a dance number performed for *Banjaran* by Zubeidaa, a film which never saw the light of day, the grandson reacts by laughing away at his naïve mother while the grandmother cannot stop her tears from flowing freely.

During the unfolding of the story of *Zubeidaa*, Benegal seamlessly weaves in the fragility the film industry and of the people working in it in the 1940s and 1950s when the industry lacked the corporate backing, the

selling of music rights and the lavish promotional campaigns through the mass media it now has access to. The once-flamboyant dance director has fallen on bad days – a brilliant cameo by the normally stereotyped Shakti Kapoor. He is now reduced to a bizarre slum dweller. Yet he willingly helps Riyaz out with his memories of the talented girl he once knew.

Rose Davenport, an actress in her youth who enjoyed the favours of Zubeidaa's father Suleiman Seth as his mistress, now lives alone in a ramshackle flat, set up typically like the home of a lonely, ageing Anglo-Indian woman. Gone is the elite and snobbish networking she once enjoyed. At one point we see the glamour and beauty of Rose as a successful film actress, while in the very next scene we see an elderly, lonely alcoholic who passes her time talking to her cats. All she lives for now is the bottle she is addicted to, and memories of days gone by. The studio system appears to have been in slow but sure fade-out during the time-frame of Zubeidaa's childhood with the star system just beginning to get a stranglehold that continues till today. The song lip-synched by Zubeidaa in the flashbacks for the dance sequence, echoes the lyrics and music of the Hindi film song of the period.

For some mysterious reason, the towering persona of Suleiman Seth disappears completely from the narrative after Zubeidaa

walks away with her prince charming. Is it perhaps, a foreshadowing of the complete obliteration of his daughter from the pages of the official history of the Fatehpur royal family? One does not know because the film does not offer any answers. This is something one would not expect Benegal to refrain from elaboration, at least through suggestion if not through articulation.

The four female characters in the film offer an insight into Benegal's mastery in handling the woman psyche from every angle, transcending barriers of communal identity, age, background and education. Apart from Zubeidaa, there is Fayyazi, Zubeidaa's mother who is Muslim and does not seem to be very educated. She never raises her voice against her domineering and abusive husband, even when he openly flaunts his woman in public. But she takes a critical decision when Karisma decided to marry the Hindu prince. Rose Davenport is an actress, a keep of Suleiman Seth and is Anglo-Indian. White-skinned and English speaking, Rose finds access to elitist social clubs, parties and polo matches graced by royalty smooth and easy. She is almost as free spirit as Zubeidaa is but not as much, since she accepts the position of 'keep' to her employer Seth, in whose B-Grade films she performs. It is like a pre-condition of her work in his films. When Riyaz comes to meet her, she is a ghost of her former self, without work or identity because post-Independence, the

Anglo-Indian was gradually falling out of favour of the newly formed Indian government.

Mandira is Hindu and she is also the *patrani*, or the senior princess officially acknowledged by the royal family, by her husband and by their subjects in Fatehpur. She speaks impeccable English, though is always bejeweled and costumed elaborately like any Indian princess of her time. Her name has been abbreviated to the British-sounding Mandy, probably motivated by the sycophantic allegiance Indian royalty is said to have had towards our former rulers. She holds herself with dignity and this is reflected in how her subjects respond to her. She has easy access to Western sports, fashion and education. But she must remain confined within the four walls of the huge palace unless her husband wishes her to step into public space, that too, in his company. With all the dignity she assumes, a personality she invests with regal bearing, Mandira has no voice when it comes to her husband choosing and getting for himself a second wife, much younger than herself, from a film family and a Muslim to boot. Does she like this sudden imposition of a co-wife on her after several years of marriage to the prince? No one knows because no female member of royalty is allowed to voice her feelings. She is there to obey, acquiesce and comply with the rules and the wishes of the prince and his family.

Mandira offers a lucid and telling counterpoint to Karisma. But at the core of it all, the three women irrespective of their communal identity, age, and socio-cultural backdrop, are objects of humiliation, oppression and abuse by patriarchy.

*Who is Zubeida?*

Who is Zubeida? Is she for real? Or is she a fictitious character created within the imaginative fantasies of a man who would like to believe that she is his mother who died when he was three? Is she a spirited young girl who is fascinated by the world of films her father belongs to and would have liked to use it as her platform to demonstrate her dancing skills? Or is she the only child of a Muslim family typified by a feudal and dictatorial father and a submissive mother who suffocate her in their separate ways instead of trying to understand and appreciate her emotional needs? She is the dutiful wife to a husband she has been forced to marry against her wishes and she is also the distraught wife who is forced to listen to the triple *talaaq* pronounced by a spineless husband when she is just learning to love him. She is mother – albeit briefly – to the little Riyaz who she gives up when asked to, in favour of going away to Fatehpur with the man who gives her life new meaning following the divorce.

She is the empathetic daughter who hates to follow in the footsteps of her mother Fayyazi,

who quietly accepts the humiliation of her husband flaunting his mistress Rose Davenport in public. Yet, she is not averse to striking a strange and close bonding with the same Rose when the latter stretches a hand of friendship in an attempt to put the shattered pieces of Zubeidaa's life together when the young girl wallows in grief following her divorce. Rose offers the magic potion in the shape and style of Vijayendra yet adds a note of caution as Zubeidaa gets embroiled helplessly in a relationship with the married prince who is Hindu. As princess and co-wife, her happiness is short-lived because she soon realises that Vijayendra's priorities are diverse and are not really as focussed on her as she thought they were. He gets involved in the first general elections of independent India and chooses to take his first wife Mandira along for his electoral campaigns. Is this ignorance bordering on social and emotional humiliation rooted in Zubeidaa's Muslim identity?<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the senior princess Mandira, she is the co-wife who refuses to abide by the laws pertaining to women in royalty and thinks nothing of joining in a commoners' group dance during a festival, only to be rebuked by the senior princess. Instead of feeling sorry

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<sup>1</sup> The script is silent about whether any religious conversion took place to convert Zubeidaa into Hinduism so one gauges that she retained her communal identity even after she got married to her Hindu prince.

and voicing her regret for this transgression, Zubeida storms out of the palace in a huff, reasserting her desire for freedom, for a life lived on her own terms. She is a woman in love - passionate, selfishly possessive, jealous, demanding the love and attention of her husband at all times. She does not shy away from displaying her anger, her hurt, her sense of betrayal to make a point, disturbing the equanimity of the prince. She combines within herself the qualities of beauty, sensuousness, charm, youth, naïveté, vulnerability, aggressiveness and pride. These qualities increase her enigma, her effervescence, her elusiveness shaping her into the ultimate woman who *thinks* she wants freedom above everything else but does not really *know* what she wants.

#### *The Many Worlds of Zubeidaa*

If one looked a bit closely, one would be able to read into the several small worlds contained in the film both reflective of and representing post-Independent India in their own distinct ways. Each of these worlds are inescapably and intricately linked to Zubeidaa while to the audience, it throws up slices of an India it has perhaps read in history books and seen in documentary films through a time and space that remains trapped in the pages of history. Zubeidaa presents a composite persona of all these small worlds. But she defines a departure from these worlds because there are

gaps in this persona and she is timeless and universal, uncompromising and unwilling to imprison herself within the dated and time-bound archives of India's post-colonial history.

The first is the world of the Seth family, a typical upper-middle-class Muslim family seemingly unaffected by the Partition of India followed by its political independence. 'Seemingly' because soon after Seth marries his daughter off to his friend's son, the friend decides that his business is insecure in India because he is a Muslim and migrates to Pakistan, writing a *finis* to the marriage and throwing the Seth family into complete disarray. The second world is the world of the film studio owned by Seth who is also a producer of B-grade films. The studio environment offers a microcosm of the synthetic world of films that is as unstable and as fragile as life itself.

The third world is the world of prince Vijayendra, comprising his status as prince of the princely state of Fatehpur, as husband to Mandira and Zubeidaa, as one sufficiently enamoured and influenced by the British way of life, his name having been changed to 'Victor' and Mandira's to 'Mandy' for the benefit of his elitist social circle. He plays polo and woos Zubeidaa in the manner and style of a British-Indian rather than that of a Rajput prince. He is also an intelligent and politically conscious man. He realises that

with Independence, his principedom may well be axed by the aggressive encroachment of a democratic republic. So, anxious to retain his status and affluence, he does what any intelligent man in his position would do – he decides to file his papers for the country's first general elections.

There is a fourth world too, larger than these small worlds – it is the world of a newly Independent India with its pluralistic political and social identity, trying to grope and come to terms with its Independence after 200 years of British rule. Zubeidaa is a microcosm and an extension of this newly acquired Independence. She truly represents the independent spirit of a free woman, not knowing that not only does the country's political independence exclude her from its new identity, but also that it staunchly refuses to either accept or acknowledge her free spirit.

Vijayendra's entry into politics slowly and surely marks the exit of Zubeidaa from his world and underlines the growing importance of Mandira who he chooses to share public space with. And this is something Zubeidaa is not willing to compromise on. Why does Vijayendra act the way he does? Is it because Zubeidaa is Muslim? Or is it because she is his second wife who his subjects probably do not know of, having accepted and acknowledged the presence and identity of Mandira as princess already? Or is it because his infatuation for the young and beautiful girl

has faded away? Perhaps it could be because he is surprised by her fiery aggression and her assertiveness, qualities he had never bargained for in his princess and having recognized them, is not prepared to accept what mark a radical departure from his value system? Benegal does not offer answers. Because all questions lead to the final question raised by Riyaz – “what did Ammi really want?”

#### *Memory as ‘Voice’*

In cinema, it is not uncommon to experience involuntary memory. It can happen when we are suddenly and unexpectedly seized, in the midst of the most mundane film, by an overwhelming sensation of sensuous reminiscences (Stern 1995: 39). Memories unfold through the series of photographs in the album Riyaz is gifted by Mandira. Memory reflected through the diaries of Zubeidaa Riyaz ‘steals’ from his grandmother’s cupboard finds a realization of Walter Benjamin’s comments on memory. “If it is fantasy which presents the correspondences to memory, it is thinking which dedicates allegories to it. Memory brings the two together” (1985: 40). In place of Benjamin’s reference to ‘thinking’ one might use the phrase ‘experiencing through the audiovisual impact created on celluloid’ to illustrate how Benegal effectively uses the diary, the film reel, the reminiscences and remarks of the people Riyaz speaks to, the red scarf floating

freely in the air, to reflect at the same time (a) the emotional crisis within Zubeidaa’s character, and (b) the emotional questions they create within Riyaz as he explores these agencies and ‘voices’ from the past to recreate his mother to fit into the scheme of his private and present world. The role these concrete ‘agencies’ play to try and put together the bits and pieces of memories together, harking back to an unknown past, is briefly underlined below.

#### *The scarf*

The scarf is a visual metaphor that recreates the spirit of the woman it belonged to – Zubeidaa. It is flame orange in colour, symbolizing the brightness and the liveliness of her passion and her spirit, her courage in defying norms, be it for dance as a young girl, or later, for Hukam Singh, the man she falls in love with. The texture of the scarf, styled out of some gossamer material like chiffon or georgette, stands for lightness so that it can flit and float freely and easily across the blue sky much like its owner did when she was alive. It flits and floats from the past into the present, from the mother, who is long dead, to the son who is alive, trying to piece together the life of a mother he has begun to understand a bit only through fragmented memories. The scarf has no definite shape; it is not shaped or styled into any definite or predetermined design, thus representing the spirit of freedom its owner

stood for, refusing to be bound by mandatory rules of style or form.

The scarf serves as a unifying factor, a ‘bridge’ so to say, between the past and the present because it is timeless and eternal. It is a blend of the real and the illusionary since it was real in the past and the filmmaker repeats it in the present like a metaphor for the benefit of the audience to create an illusion in the present. The characters within the film’s present time, Riyaaz specially, do not really see it, but the audience does. The presence of the scarf in the film is backed by a signature tune, a blend of pathos, mystery and history, written beautifully by A.R.Rahman on lyrics penned by Javed Akhtar that spell out a moving elegy on the young woman. The tune is the signature tune both of the film and its central character present only through flashbacks into the past. Yet, the scarf is there even when she is not. The flame orange scarf that once belonged to Zubeidaa when she was alive is now detached from its owner. It has assumed an identity of its own, and often functions as both signifier and signified. It becomes a character unto itself, embodying as it does, the spirit of freedom, the sense of abandonment its owner lived and died for and the timelessness of memory.

#### *The Family Album*

The presence of Zubeidaa’s photographs in the album Mandira hands over to Riyaz shows

both Mandira’s and Riyaz’s fondness for memories. Mandira’s because she has fond memories of the young Zubeidaa and that is why she held on to the album for so long. Riyaz’s because the album offers him a glimpse into parts of a story the photographs spell out. They bring to mind John Berger’s comments on and his distinction between public and private photography. The private preserves context and continuity unlike the public photograph, which is “torn out of context”, a “dead object” lending “itself to any arbitrary use” (1980: 56-63). For Berger, like Andre Bazin, photographs are relics, traces of what happened. To become part of the past, part of making history, they “require a living context” (Ibid). This memory “would encompass an image of the past, however tragic...within its own continuity” (Ibid). Photography then becomes “the prophesy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved” (Mellencamp 1995: 51). The hint of the story to come “replaces the photograph in time – not in its own original time for that is impossible – but in narrative time” (Ibid: 52). Narrated time becomes historic time that respects memory (Ibid). For both Mandira and Riyaz, the album and the photographs therein hold both nostalgic and sentimental value. While Mandira is a bit reluctant to let go of it, Riyaz wants to get it and hold on to it desperately. The photographs in the album offer a glimpse into the only

period in life Zubeidaa was truly happy and thrilled in the fresh flush of love and marriage. It is the only private record of her brief life as co-wife of Vijayendra Singh. Because as it gradually transpires, even with a perfectly legitimate relationship, Zubeidaa's second marriage gives her the position of nothing more than that a royal concubine would enjoy. The prince's bigamous marriage on the other hand, is viewed as a royal and male prerogative.

*The reel of Black-and-White film with Zubeidaa's song-dance number*

Film image is iconic because it is photographic. It is also symbolic, as Christian Metz and Roland Barthes have pointed out. It can also be indexical. French filmologist Andre Bazin implicitly recognized the indexical character of the film image when he spoke of fidelity to nature, of presenting things as they are, and of reducing fiction to a minimum (Valicha 1980). Metz and Barthes stress the symbolic signification of the film image. Metz is impressed by the linguistic analogy and sees cinematic signs as coded information. Peter Wollen (1972) highlights the iconic aspect of the image and its liable properties. The icon is the image itself, the primary dimension of film and the focus of the filmmaker's attention. It is what the film deals with. It is also, according to Wollen, shifting and elusive, defying capture by the critic. In

effect, Wollen de-emphasizes the idea of a code that assumes a system of explicit cinematic conventions.

In *Zubeidaa*, the image of the old film reel has all three values – indexical, iconic and symbolic. It is iconic because it designates antiquity. It is indexical because it hints at something that cannot be forgotten and is carved in memory, something that has transcended the boundaries of time. It is symbolic because it represents both the passing of an age and nostalgia for it (Valicha Ibid.)

The film reel serves as a reminder of an age gone by – an age, which, in its sentimental self-articulation, was one during which films were made with a completely different mindset. The film world then was known for women of questionable morals inhabiting it. It was a world of ostracisation that precluded the entry of girls from respectable families participating in it. It was a world where young girls obeyed their dictatorial fathers without questioning the propriety of their dictation; a world that spelt total and absolute insecurity for its workers in the future. It suggests a nostalgic yearning for the past. Its changed positioning in the two settings – Mandira's custody and Riyaz's screening the film in a private theatre for an audience of two – his grandmother and himself - offer a perception of a changing reality in which the old and the new have become irreconcilable.

The film reel is a beautiful image that captures an age that in some sense is still with us. Paradoxically, it has lost its function in an era of sophisticated music systems and television and has therefore, become an ‘outsider.’ At the same time, looked at from another angle, it is an ‘insider’ in that it offers a telling comment on human callousness and indignity towards things that are of no practical use except as a lost slice of life found at last by the grown son of a mother he never knew.

The film is titled *Banjaran*, meaning ‘gypsy woman’ a female member of a rootless tribe that wanders from one place to another, rootless, its identity defined by this very nature of wandering and its refusal to dig roots and settle down in one place. In some strange and distant way, this would perhaps fit into a definition of the persona of Zubeidaa who kept wandering – from her father’s home to her first husband’s home to Fatehpur, trying to mould herself into the different casts shaped for her for people other than herself, yet failing to ‘belong’ to any of these worlds. The film, like Zubeidaa’s life, is left incomplete, cut short, unfinished. It is also totally obliterated from the history of Indian cinema, much like Zubeidaa’s very existence that has been obliterated from official history and from royal memory except from the memories of Mandira.

The lyrics of the song for the dance number that Zubeidaa performs in front of the movie camera for the film-that-never-was offer yet another telling glimpse into the wild and free spirit Zubeidaa was. The lyrics begin with the line – *main albeli, ghoomoon akeli. . . .pagli hoon main* (I am wild, I wander alone, I am one crazy woman) shedding light on all that Zubeidaa is and was.

#### *Zubeidaa’s diary*

The diary that Zubeida wrote plays an important role in the film. It is kept secret right through Riyaz’s growth from childhood to boyhood to adulthood by his grandmother Fayyazi who does not wish to let go of it as a fragmented piece of nostalgia of the daughter she once had. When Riyaz asks her for the diary, she stubbornly refuses to hand it over to him and keeps it under lock and key. The secrecy is rationalized because she does not wish the son to know certain details about his mother. In Fayyazi’s value system, some secrets of a mother are best left so for a son, especially when the mother is no longer around to protect her privacy. One night, Riyaz steals it stealthily and when the grandmother finds out, she is hurt and angry at his betrayal of the trust that forms the basis of the relationship. But the anger fades away as she learns to accept his quest for his dead mother.

For Riyaz, it brings his mother back to life because it is the only agent that defines her ‘voice.’ It points out that his mother was not just a whimsical and beautiful woman who was impulsive and a bit wild, but was a thinking woman who articulated her thoughts through a diary. The diary represents the fulfilment of Zubeidaa’s desire to speak with herself. It shows that she reflected upon and introspected about the events in her life. The diary represents Zubeida’s life till the point that ends her life with her parents because she leaves it behind when she goes to Fatehpur with Vijayendra. The diary sheds light on Zubeidaa’s identity from a first-person point of view, unlike the other agencies of the film reel, the album of photographs and the interviews Riyaz takes of the people who knew her when she was alive. It shapes her identity in a way different from the other secondary agencies offer.

The film reel, the diary and the album of photographs offer fragments of information about Zubeida during different phases of her brief life. The reel of film pertains to her girlhood days when she dreamt of making it big as a film star. This is complemented with Riyaz’s interaction with the dance director and with Rose Davenport. The diary comes after the reel of film in chronological sequence, the gaps here being partly filled by Fayyazi. The album is the access to Zubeidaa’s life at Fatehpur after her marriage to Vijayendra,

again supported by recalling moments of sweet nostalgia by Mandira juxtaposed against the negative point-of-view expositions by Vijayendra’s good-for-nothing brother and the old family aide. The red scarf, with its symbolic omnipresence, covers all of this and more, since it extends itself to transcend the past and step into the present, embracing Riyaz within itself.

### *Conclusion*

In *Zubeidaa*, Benegal uses multiple perspectives along with the ‘voice’ of his subject through the pages of her diary long after she is dead. Through point-of-view visual, music and sound images from agencies like the album, the film reel, the reminiscences, comments and opinions of third parties, Benegal puts together different pieces of Zubeidaa’s life by the dis-embodiment of her from her ‘body’ which has ceased to be, leaving these other perspectives to do the ‘talking’. This liberates Zubeidaa from the stereotype of the celluloid woman character from the captivity of her ‘body’ kept in control only in flashbacks. Thus, the beauty of her face and figure is designedly kept away from offering any voyeuristic pleasure or titillation to the audience, save for the beauty of the **star** Karishma Kapoor chosen to portray the character and does it like none other could possibly have done.

*Zubeidaa* is a beautiful film where elements of postmodern cinema are smoothly blended into the modern to form a harmonious and lyrical whole. Essential qualities of postmodernism such as – fusing the past and the present, pastiche, intertextuality, the feeling of a perpetual present, and nostalgia subtly come across the narrative and cinematographic space of the film. Add to this the electrifying performance of mainstream actress Karisma Kapoor in the title role and you easily have Benegal's best after his *Sooraj Ka Satvan Ghoda*. It is a poignant story of a fascinating woman whose life is pieced together by her son who did not know her because she had died in an air-crash when he was very small.

From *Mammo* to *Sardari Begum* to *Hari Bhari* and *Zubeidaa*, Shyam Benegal shows a remarkable range and astonishing depth of understanding a Muslim family's turbulent life. He never misses a telling detail, be it a forced *nikaah* or a shattering *talaaq* (divorce).

He also uses music to accentuate the ambience and reflect the moral and emotional crises of his characters. As is his wont, Benegal never allows anything to grow larger than life and despite a compromise here and there for the box office, *Zubeidaa* sustains an aura of realism. You seem to be watching real people reacting to each other in authentic human situations. 🍿

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