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Ship of Theseus: an odyssey within

A film review of *Ship of Theseus* (English/Hindi 2013)

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SHIP OF THESEUS (2013)

Director: Anand Gandhi

Cast: Aida El-Kashef, Sohum Shah, Neeraj Kabi, Vinay Shukla

Music: Naren Chandavarkar, Benedict Taylor

India is a land of religions. One cannot escape religion even in remote areas of this country. So, does this make an Indian psyche religious? Assuming this would amount to hasty generalisation. There is, however, one fact about the Indian psyche, which cannot be ignored. Though an Indian psyche may not have acute understanding of philosophies entailed in so many religions in India, he/she may have a smattering of awareness of the philosophies that make these religions unique and mutually co-exist. Given this fact, it is not difficult to find conversations in India interspersed with ‘philosophy’ and with infrequent ‘references’ to the ‘higher power’ above us.

Indian cinema is also replete with films, which reflect this facet of the Indian psyche. Films such as *Mayabazar* (Telugu, 1957), *Guide* (Hindi, 1965), *Samskara* (Kannada, 1971), *Shirdi Ke Sai Baba* (Hindi, 1977) and in recent years *OMG-Oh My God* (Hindi, 2012) have philosophical elements in them and have found huge acceptance among viewers as they reflect their own beliefs in more ways than one. These films either propagate or provide

validity to prevailing beliefs among viewers or they question the acceptance of beliefs among people and prescribe them a way of living that maintains the social fabric of society.

Anand Gandhi’s latest film *Ship of Theseus* neither questions nor provides validity to the prevailing beliefs of viewers. Instead, through his film he presents a mirror to the audience without much morbidity and amazement. He achieves this with the detachment of a painter who gives us ‘the ambience’ along with his subject of the painting. Such an approach has two aspects to it. Either you get it or you miss the underlying thought of the film.

Through three interconnected stories, Gandhi presents us the verbosity in our expressions, confronts us with the triviality of arguments that are nothing short of brief intoxication, shames us at the very core of our being for being so cosy in our cocooned world which functions on self-serving ideology, makes us think of our definitions of good and evil, happiness and sorrow, selfishness and altruism and so on. It is a fruit of utmost detachment towards the subject at hand and it is very clear that Anand Gandhi has treaded this philosophical odyssey with utmost caution. He uses the Hyperlink Cinema format to its advantage. Just like Mexican film director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu films such as *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006), this film binds together three different stories to a common link.

The three stories in the film touch the deep recesses of our minds. The first in the three stories is about a blind avant-garde photographer. She captures images on the basis of sound, smell and her thought-provoking instinct. It seems everything about her has symmetry and grace—be it tender movements of her eyelashes, the sheen of her supple skin or staunch determination in her voice. Before undergoing eyes transplantation, the symmetry of her instinct and the very advantage of being absent from the world visually, lend unusual charm to her photographs. But she has strong notions about her creations. So strong that she can be at the peril of coming across stubborn and closed. This is pardonable, because perceiving her world so bereft of definitions, ideas and conformations through emotionally swollen and inadvertently conditioned eyes of the mundane world can be inappropriate and unfair. She knows this, and she is proud of this fact.

This innocent affair with ‘her visual world’ without the slightest provocation from the physical world of people with vision is, however, a short-lived affair. She undergoes eyes transplantation. After a successful corneal transplantation, she faces a world that is chaotic and this world does not move with the ‘unhurried pace’ which she is so used to. She meets faces that could be repulsive, extremely expressive, and aggressive. She experiences ‘excess’—excess in everything. This can be

stultifying. When you are exposed to too much of details of something, the thing loses its charm. It makes you feel ‘heavy’. It can be burdensome. It can compel you to run away to that place where you would be near to your creation but not in full grip of the realities associated with it. It does not liberate you, but rather it constraints you. It makes us feel that many a time less is more.

The film’s second story is a very important one from the point of view of present times. Today with so much bombardment of information through various media such as newspapers, news channels, social networking web sites and other modes of communication, we have people with strong opinions. This can be disturbing. It has increased the tendency to pontificate and left very little scope for ‘action’. One is tempted to draw a parallel with the novel *Siddhartha* (1922) by German writer Hermann Hesse. Here is a monk who is on a crusade. He refuses to take medicines, which are tried and tested on animals. He objects to the inhuman way animals are treated in laboratories for testing the efficacy of various drugs. His views are questioned and challenged by an opinionated and loquacious speaker who is a lawyer fighting his case. What is interesting about this conversation is it highlights the futility of ‘intellectualising’ things. Take for instance, when the young lawyer quips, “You monks are supposed to be

celibate then why do you do intellectual masturbation.” This statement has wit. And it tells us something beyond the wit: The moment you ‘intellectualise’ things instead of ‘experiencing’ them, you miss the ‘truth’ and the ‘beauty’ in them.

The monk in the story embarks on a journey of renunciation. He soon realises that his vow of ‘renunciation’ is an escape or maybe a ‘sport’. People come and visit him. They touch his feet. For those who visit him, he becomes a figure who has gone beyond the worldly trappings. But the monk feels a subtle uneasiness in such reception. It makes us feel: What is he seeking by this exercise or mission? Is he just quoting or referring to the experience of ‘others’, which he has not experienced? It reminds us of the character Siddhartha in the novel *Siddhartha* when he warns Govinda that “words and thoughts” are hurdles to what can be experienced, and he says ‘wisdom cannot be passed on.’ It dawns on the monk that there is nothing to seek, but there is everything to ‘experience’.

The film’s final story is about a young man who is on a path of introspection. He gauges meaning in his and people’s actions. He lives a simple and uneventful life. He does not share good rapport with his grandmother who represents the moneyed class that is so obsessed with finding a ‘substantial’ purpose in life. She questions his way of living and coaxes him to think about his contribution to the

society. This young man receives a new lease of life through a kidney transplant. He realises that his new lease of life has come at a price. He suspects a ‘racket’ in kidney transplantation and sets off on a journey that make him realise that ‘truth’ and ‘idealism’ pale in front of ‘hard’ facts of life. He realises that as individuals we are much more than the truth. And when reality dawns on us, truth becomes ‘insignificant’ and we are left with nothing but ‘hard’ facts of life such as poverty, lack of food and other miseries to deal with.

These stories are deeply personal. Seeking for some solution or some ‘definite’ answers in these stories would mean distancing us from the problems that we face. We don’t know the answers. Because we feel answers also have a different set of questions in them. The moment we become certain about our viewpoints regarding things around us, the trouble starts. So, what should we do? Do we need to be more open to others and things around us?

Is there something in us that needs to be changed or transformed? And even if we get transformed, would it set things appropriate and fine? Just like the legend behind the name of the film, you don’t know what is what even after a transformation. But we do know what ace American director Sidney Lumet said in his insightful book, *Making Movies*, about films: “Some movies tell a story and leave you with a feeling”. Some tell a story, and leave you with a feeling and give you an idea. Some tell a

story, leave you with a feeling, give you an idea and reveal something about yourself and

others. Indeed, *Ship of Theseus* falls in the last category. 🧐
