

Guest Column/ Article

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Shifting Centres: A Study in the Depiction of Domestic Helps in Indian Films



Rohini Hattangadi in Arth (1983)

Sarojini has knee pain. In spite of that she practises Odissi. The passionate dancer had struggled a lot to maintain her career. On 19th April, her daughter, an aspiring doctor finds that her famous mother has forgotten the death anniversary of her father. The senior lady tried her best to please a sulking husband and maintain a promising career. She was never successful in doing that. Her husband was suffering from sheer inferiority complex. He simply could not accept a celebrity wife. The daughter wanted her mother to succumb to the man of the house and that she never did. The husband dies of heart attack when the dancer is performing far away. This incident creates a breach between the mother and the daughter. They continue to drift apart.

The rest of the plot of the film is known to all the cine goers. What I want to focus is the balancing factor in the film. She is the elderly maid Bela who keeps on balancing the equations of the household, by maintaining a dignified poise and yet providing the mistress and her daughter with a most caring and affectionate touch.

Writuparno Ghosh had decentred the balance of the upper middleclass households on screen by projecting that not the serving class are always dependent on the masters but yes, the masters are dependent on them, materially and emotionally.

The commercial Hindi movies always had the faithful Ramu kaka character. He is a benevolent soul, always present with a glass of water or “ek cup chaye.” This person has no family, no personal life, has hardly any personal point of view.

His absolute devotion to the family is marked as he emerges as a dull, naive onlooker of the things happening around him, sometimes nursing the protagonist or fetching a letter.

All Hrishikesh Mukherjee movies screen this ever faithful Ramukaka and who can forget the same person attending our Thakur Sahab in Sholay?

The Indian cultural ethos secretly and openly possesses a feudal, hierarchical structure in which Ramukakasor Gitamausis are forced to lose their identity. Even the films of Satyajit Ray have these faithful souls in the household to open the door, to serve tea to the guests or help the lady of the house to serve lunch or dinner!

As Ray had his focus restricted to a single issue in multiple layers, Writuparno Ghosh, as a worthy successor of the Master film maker takes a deeper look into the characterisation of the indispensable souls of an upper middle class family, the domestic helps.

When Mahesh Bhatt directed ARTH , a very talented actress made her debut in that path breaking film. She was Rohini Hattangadi playing the role of a maid servant who works in the house of Kulbhushan and Shabana to support herself and her girl child. As the film has a sharp focus on Kulbhusan's adulterous affair with Smita and Shabana's desperate effort to make her own career in the big , bad world, it has an equally strong focus on Hattandadi's portrayal of the maid who works hard so that she can send her daughter to school , she does not want her baby to suffer like her and reprimands Kulbhusan on his face for leaving the wife for his model girl. Bhatt gives Hattangadi a very strong base which goes deep into the plot as she murders her husband for the sake of her daughter and goes to jail. Shabana adopts the girl after rejecting a marriage proposal and Kulbhusan's apologies as well.

There had been no decentring of social structure in ARTH but the maid was given a strong voice, a rational mind and a bold initiative that changed the plot in the end and the emotional relation between the mistress and the maid had a deep impact on the mind of the viewers. She, illiterate but working, "uncultured" but strong is a shelter for the lady of the house in her moments of emotional breakdown and crises.

What Writuparno Ghosh did to films is to work on this wonderful emotional balance and he made the viewers rethink about this very special class bound master and working class relationship.



Rabi Ghosh in Golpo Holeo Sotti

The Hindi version was BAWARCHI and the Bengali one was GALPO HOLEO SOTTI. Rajesh Khanna in Hindi and Rabi Ghosh in Bengali played the role of the magical domestic help who could change the mood of the family. They could handle tantrums, could cook and serve in time, could act as wisest counsellor and the term "Mushkil Asaan" could be the most suitable for them. But then, that was fantasy and the hierarchical pattern of the family did not change, neither did the patriarchal structure had had any breach.

Writuparno Ghosh meant it. He had broken a given monolythical structure. In UNISHE APRIL, Baya is the balancing factor, the emotional shelter for the aspirant doctor girl who plans of committing suicide being rejected by her boyfriend.

Baya is played in excellent undertones by the veteran actor Chitra Sen whose theatrical experience helps in her screen presence. She stares kindly, speaks with affection and remembers that it is Aditi's father's death anniversary. As she was there with the child Aditi when her father died, one must remember that master stroke by Ghosh as the feverish kid refuses to go to the toilet with family members and allows only Baya to assist her in the toilet. The intimacy becomes a life long relation as a grown up Mithu or Aditi allows Baya to visit her sister and makes prescriptions for the sister's ailing child! The maid is given her own voice, her own space and her own distinct position. She has a life of her own and the viewers should pay attention to it. She is the emotional care giver of the family and the

decentres the role of the masters as givers only. They are takers, in many ways.



Unishe April

In BARIWALI, who will ever forget the bubbly Malati played superbly by Sudipta Chakraborty! But we are to concentrate on the

relationship between Banalata and Malati. The mistress and the maid. Malati with her youth and vigour brings fresh air to the dilapidated mansion of Banalata. She is vibrant, quarrelsome, chirpy, moody and passionately in love with a local boy. Banalata, the aristocratic spinster depends on Malati in all possible ways. Malati is the bridge between Banalata and the world outside. Malati persuades her mistress to allow the filmwalas to shoot in the house, she steals petticoats from the film actress, she quarrels with Prasanna and even goes with Banalata as far as she can. Writuparno creates memorable moments as Malati rushes in and pleads Banalata to switch on the television by saying that a Bachchan movie is going on! As both the lady and the maid watch television eagerly, the younger one slyly tries to use the body lotion of the mistress and the alert mistress snatches it in reflex action! Banalata is vulnerable. She is naive and helpless compared to the confident and vocal Malati.



Shob Charitro Kalponik

In her dream Banalata explores her own eroticism which is triggered by Malati's intimacy with her lover that Banalata had witnessed on a stormy evening. And yet, Malati isn't just an objective co relative. She is very much flesh and blood, leaving her job after quarrelling with the mistress and then coming back with a large grin. As Malati is very young, she cannot be the emotional shelter for Banalata but there is no denial that she is an emotional companion of the lady and a

balancing factor. Without her the film would lose its x-factor. Banalata helplessly depends on her. She is worried if Malati gets married and go away and yet finally asks her to watch the film with her boy friend as sherself retires in her melancholic chamber. The mistress and the maid share a wonderful bonding. They quarrel and fight, they care for each other and represent a strange sisterhood .The emotional depth remain unspoken but it hovers through the entire film.

DOSAR also had a very dignified domestic help to stand by the deceived wife in times of crises but she was not given space or place. When the insensitive landlady teases the grief stricken wife, the elderly maid shows motherly concern.She has a serene presence.

I would rather talk about SHOB CHARITRA KALPONIK in which the most powerful character was I think played by Sohag Sen. She is Nandarmaa in the posh household of Radhika and Indraneel, the poet. And yet as the plot unfolds, we get to know from a postcard that Nandarmaa is Priyabala Das who may receive a postcard from a relative. Radhika asks, “Are you Priyabala Das?” in her sophisticated tone and immediately Indraneel makes an instant mimicry “Priyabala Das?”

Nandarmaa had a past when her father called her Dulali and her sister was Aduri. Fondly, her grandmother named the two sisters Priyabala and Surabala. Nandarmaa is not a subplot. She is integral to the main plot. As Joy Goswami reads out his poem, the exodus of the refugees from Bangladesh covers the panorama and then and there Nandarmaa's Baangaal diction is validated. History is visited. Partition and the plight of the refugees are referred to through distant visuals and Nandarmaa is established as a major character.

Once again, she is the emotional corner for Radhika who is upset with primarily an indifferent and callous husband who does not even care to inform that Radhika's father had a heart attack and does not notice

that no food is left for Nandarmaa. After the death of Indraneel a tired Radhika whose lover has left her breaks down before Nandarmaa. It is from her Radhika comes to know that Indraneel had stolen all her poems and now she cannot fight with a shadow. There is nobody to stand by her. As she decides to leave Indraneel's place, Nandarmaa accompanies her, even in dreams where Nandarmaa can board the bus to Gaya but Radhika fails.

Protective, caring, strong and sensible, these domestic helps offer empathy and care in times of crises and yet the director maintains a fine balance in the system. The given emotional structure is dismissed as the maid offers helping hand and assurance but following reality the director does not spoil or disturb the social structure. The hierarchy is carefully maintained with human touch. But a shift is made. The serving group is given voice and space in history. They are flesh and blood beings and the cardboard characters are gone. The director does not deep delve in their lives but creates enough space in which they have solid grounds. If she is a nurse, she has shifting duties. Who can forget the beautiful Rajeswari in *THE LAST LEAR*? In fact the trio, Preity Zinta as the filmstar, Shephali as the lady of the house and the pretty nurse make a kind a sisterhood in the film. They are victims of suppression, sexual jealousy and indifference. They are so different but so alike! The journey from Ramukakas to individual domestic helps is a long story, here cut short. Gender role plays an important part in this structure shift but that is another story.

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