

Article

Rekha Deshpande

## Muhammad the Messenger of God: A Miracle Without Impact!



Majid Majidi's film *Muhammad the Messenger of God* (2015) was in the news recently as the Barelvi Raza Academy issued a Fatwa against Majid Majidi and music director A. R. Rehman and demanded a ban on the film. Earlier Sunni Arab countries also had criticized the film by claiming that 'Muhammad is shown in an untrue light and the film undermines the role Muhammad played in Islam.' (Iran is a Shia Muslim country). The various intentions behind this 'Ban the Movie' business and its repercussions has become a usual phenomenon. Let us leave aside the religious, political, sectarian differences and controversies. As far as considering it as cinema, the importance of the film lies in that it is the first ever epic Iranian film. It is also the biggest budget Iranian film and an international project as many non-Iranians have contributed to the making of it. Its cinematography is by an Italian cameraman Vittorio Storaro and music by our own A. R. Rehman. The film was also filmed in South Africa besides Iran. Majid Majidi decided to make this film as a reaction, rather a fitting retort to a cartoon that had insulted Muhammad the prophet.

It is a story of the first 13 years of Muhammad's life. The nature of the fact and narration is quite similar to that of Christ's life story, the prophesy about the birth of this divine child, his struggle against the enemies, the powerful people, the rulers and his ultimate victory, his appeal for peace and compassion. As far as Muhammad is concerned, a major part of his appeal to the people is to shun idol-worship and polytheism. When he is about to be born as per the prophesy, the idols of *Lata*, *Uzza*, *Hubal* and hundreds of other deities being worshipped in the pre-Islamic period in the Arab peninsula begin to fall and break miraculously.

Miracles play an important part in *Muhammad the Messenger of God*. True, history of Faiths often accompanies such miracles, and takes the form of mythology rather than history based on pure facts, driving itself away from authenticity and rational thinking. The miracles therein have been mentioned and taken for granted from generation to generation, from ages to ages. They go with the nature of the story as well. Well! They can form

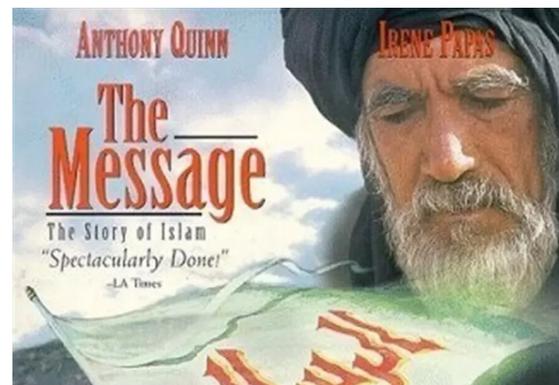
the style of the narration in a literary work or a film or any such art form. Do they contribute to the emotional impact of the work? This is a question today's audience would like to raise. Would they after all get carried away by the miracles? If not, then the film fails to have any impact on them.



It reminds me of Prabhat Film Company's *Sant Tukaram* (1936) made in the late 30s. Miracles happen in that story of the saint poet *Tukaram*. The film had a tremendous emotional impact on the audience not only of the 30s, but even in the decades that followed. Is it because the present audience also believes in miracles? I do not think so. The fact is that each and every miracle in the film is actually a device to create psychological impact on the audience and not an illogical miracle in itself as such. For instance, when *Awli*, *Tukaram*'s wife comes to know the name of the kind old man who picked the thorn from her bare foot, is *Vitthal*, she starts cursing him angrily and goes away. The old man starts laughing and turns into Lord *Vishnu* i.e. *Vitthal* (*Vitthal* is one more local name of Lord *Vishnu*, quite popular in *Maharashtra*) still laughing at her lovable anger. The audience too joins him laughing at her naive lovable conviction. *Awli* is constantly complaining about *Tukaram*'s neglect towards his worldly duties as a householder as he is always submerged in singing and writing devotional verses. So much so that the wife hates his God *Vitthal* as she thinks he is responsible for her husband's behavior. The so-called miracle becomes immaterial whereas what dominates is the emotional impact of the scene. *Awli* is likely to hate the very mention of the word *Vitthal*. Even if it belongs to an ordinary man, it reminds her of her husband's beloved God *Vitthal* who she thinks is responsible for the penury she and her family has to go through. It is a simple psychological

happening. The purpose of the film maker is more than served. The character of *Awli* becomes all the more lovable as a result.

It also reminds me of *The Message*, Moustapha Akkad's film of 1976. In it Muhammad is already 40 years old and his followers, though a very few in number at that time have started to spread his message. The story narrates how Muhammad and his followers had to face the wrath of the merchant community of Mecca whose trade interests relied upon the illiterate people visiting Mecca to worship the idols of their various gods and how Muhammad and his followers growing in number come out winners and establish a new religious order after fighting fierce battles. The film claims to be based on authentic historical facts. What is commendable, besides the powerful visuals, compared to those of Majidi's, the fact that Akkad does not resort to miracles. Instead he depends upon logical course of events and convincing arguments. If Akkad, way back in 1976 could do away with miracles, why would Majidi choose the easy path of miracles? Besides unlike *Sant Tukaram* of 1936, they hardly contribute to the emotional, psychological impact.



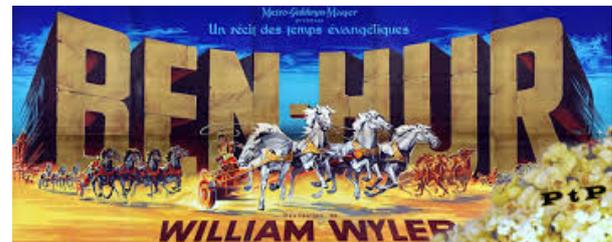
In the first half of Majidi's *Muhammad...*, the idols in Mecca start falling on the ground automatically that is miraculously, at the birth of Muhammad. (In that case the grown-up Muhammad would not have to struggle so much to free *Kabah* of the idolatry and polytheism!) During *Abraha*'s invasion his army of elephants suddenly denies marching ahead. In another incident *Jameel* the camel who is about to be sold and butchered, frees himself and starts running only to stop in the courtyard of *Amina*, Muhammad's mother just to lead

the wet-nurse *Halima* to her destined duty of breast-feeding the divine child. They do help a little in the buildup of the emotional impact. But this result is unfortunately not achieved every time a miracle happens in the film. Halima is sick and sorcerers are applying their age old weird remedies while superstitious bystanders wait, Little Muhammad comes and without saying a word starts removing all those weird things put on Halima's body, and lo, Halima opens her eyes and slowly attains consciousness. She is cured. This is a very important statement in as much as it speaks of Muhammad's views about superstitions. But just by removing those objects from her body by him she is shown as cured. That is, Muhammad's touch itself works miracle, countering as if the earlier display of the protest against superstitions. Muhammad who cures the foster mother miraculously is devastated when his own biological mother dies.



There are quite a lot of similarities in the stories from the Bible and the Quran. The three religions of the book that flourished in the middle east. It is but natural to have them full of many similar stories, similar miracles, similar characters. Muhammad's story resembles that of Jesus Christ's story. There is a prophecy about Muhammad's birth. A divine light is witnessed by various concerned persons at the time of Muhammad's birth. According to Christian and Hindu mythologies, Christ's birth and Lord Krishna's birth respectively accompany such miraculous natural phenomena. For that matter in all the mythological stories some such good omens are manifest. The main focus of the story here is how the child Muhammad is being protected from the cruel Opponents. From the very birth the child is being chased by the cruel authorities, for this child is going to prove the death knell of their

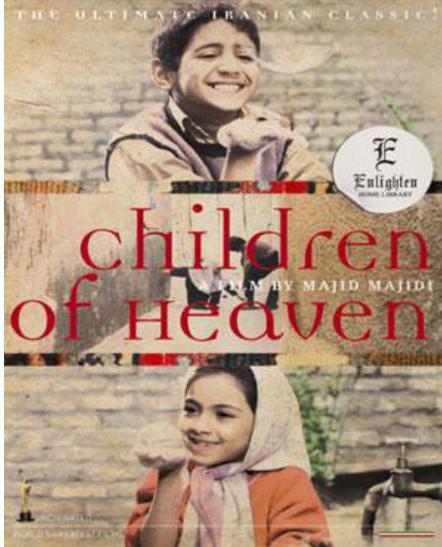
cruel religious-social rule. (Again, a similarity to Christ and Lord Krishna's stories!) So, the child has to be protected. It is a task to do so. Handing over the child to another woman, the wet-nurse, taking the child to some far away region, hiding the child's identity from the enemies and so on. So, the story proceeds in the expected way. But hardly catching the full attention.



The norm is, as everybody is aware of, that the impersonation of Muhammad the prophet offends the spirituality of his message, so the prophet is not to be shown. Pictures, sketches of Muhammad do not just exist, nor are they allowed to be drawn by imaginative artists ever. Moustapha Akkad decided not to show Muhammad in person. In his film Muhammad's followers become his representatives whenever the message is to be delivered or the other party is to be convinced. Sometimes Akkad's camera acts as *Muhammad*. As far as cinema and its social impact is concerned, there is always a danger of public assuming the actor to be the divine entity. We in India have experienced this phenomenon very often. *Shobhana Samarth* was worshipped by the people wherever she went after she played *Seeta* in *Ram Rajya*. *Anita Guha* was worshipped as Santoshi Mata for quite a long period after *Jai Santoshi Mata* (1975) became super hit. A worldly entity is thus lifted to the divine height which is totally unacceptable to the orthodox Muslim norms.

Majid Majidi observes this norm by not exposing Muhammad's face. Remember, in *Ben Hur* (1959) Christ's face was also kept hidden from the camera with very clever and effective device. Majid Majidi, it seems, has the same images in his mind while conceiving Muhammad the Messenger of God's imagery. A chained and thirsty Ben Hur is lashed and dragged through the scorching desert along with other slaves by the Roman soldiers and is

denied water, a mysterious person leans over Ben Hur and offers him water. Ben Hur looks up and is as if flabbergasted by the vision of this mysterious person. The audience cannot see the face of this mysterious person, for the camera is at the back of this person facing the stunned Ben Hur. Since he is leaning over Ben



Hur, while pouring the water from the pitcher into Ben Hur's cupped hands his long hair hangs on one side hiding his face from the camera. At this time Ben Hur does not know who this man is. The world gets to know him as the Christ later. It is Ben Hur's expression that conveys to the audience that he has witnessed something unique, something very divine. The mysterious person is the Giver, Compassion personified. Ben Hur is the oppressed and depressed one asking for his compassion. In the later part of the film when Christ is about to be crucified and is made to carry his own cross, he has bent down with the heavy burden of the cross on his shoulders. Now it is Ben Hur's turn to offer the thirsty Christ a bowl of water. Ben Hur does the same but again he is holding the bowl in his cupped hands and facing the camera while Christ carrying the cross with his back towards the camera, is leaning down to quench his thirst. A grateful Ben Hur is looking up with adulation to this mysterious man who he knows, by now, is the savior

of oppressed humankind. Christ's long hair again is hanging on one side hiding his face from the camera. In the scene of the sermon on the mountain Christ is seen from his back, so the face of the actor remains unknown to the audience throughout the film. These devices create a certain aura around Christ and very effectively.

In *Muhammad the Messenger of God* infant Muhammad's face is hidden from the camera while especially the wet-nurse's infant daughter's face is distinctly made visible as if to underline the hiddenness of Muhammad. Muhammad being at the center of the film it was a challenge to not let the camera see Muhammad's face. But the 'attempts' to hide his face behind the trail of the white cloth forming the Arabic turban on his head every now and then and to film him with his back to the camera become too obvious on the audience. With the result the audience drift away from the story and start observing the devices, the angles that would hide Muhammad's face. There is a shot where little Muhammad is filling the pitcher at a stream, where he leans on one side, his long hair hanging on his left shoulder hiding his face from the camera reminds one of *Ben Hur's* Christ! Perhaps Majid Majidi thinks people have forgotten *Ben Hur* by now! But the question remains whether the film convinces the audience even as a work of art?

What is the purpose behind making the film-A question is often put to a director. As far as a feature film is concerned, I think it should be the other way round. The film should just tell a story, the story in due course would deliver the purpose, the message of the film. Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* itself is one of the best examples of this order. Unfortunately, in *Muhammad the Messenger of God* the intentions overshadow the whole effort losing its integrity and impact.

---

*Ms. Rekha Deshpande is a Member of the Fipresci-India based in Mumbai.*