



Satire At Its Biting Best: Anusha Rizvi's Peepli Live As A Socio-Political Document

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Introduction

The visual or the visible medium exerts tremendous influence on the socio-political milieu of nations, permeating every aspect of its social order. Moving image is the medium of mass culture and the most important and universal art form of the 20 century. They perform the role of neo-colonizers taking possession of the psyche of society through deliberate intrusion into the socio-political and economic life of the nation. Films are the most popular and effective visual media acting as modes of signification through which social realities get reconstructed. More than any other art it has the power to shape our sense of identity and understanding. It opens a window into culture and its study brings us the intimacy and immediacy unavailable from most other media of communication, Film Studies which has emerged as one of the most important academic disciplines in the 21 century is extremely interdisciplinary in nature. Film theory considers films as distinct cultural products reflecting the values and ideas of society and culture. They converge politics and human experience envisaging an interpretation of personal sentiments and political ideology of the mores that produced it

The line of demarcation of "commercial" and "art" has declined considerably and film making has emerged as a potent medium to provoke thought and to generate discourses regarding various issues before the world wide audience. The complex and multifaceted relationship between the global and the local is most powerfully represented in films foregrounding issues of political and social relevance. They are considered as pieces of individual expression or cultural artifacts. Films are increasingly used as vital instruments of social criticism since an artist may find it extremely difficult to put life, art and politics into watertight compartments. There has been an array of film makers who highlighted serious social issues painting the plain absurdity of contemporary life. They have given illuminating portrayals of individuals caught in the whirlpool of power game striving to evolve strategies for survival in a hostile, regimented and unpredictable environment. Those films are innate documents of contemporary milieu envisioning a multidimensional picture of the society with all its discrepancies and vicissitudes. Some very recent western productions such as Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004). Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth (2006), Robert Kenner's Food, Inc. (2009) etc. have prominently focused attention on major social issues ranging from environment to healthcare reforms. When socio-political issues are portrayed with a tinge of satire, it becomes changing worline reviewing and reinventing kiterure and culture all the more palatable and hilarious for the audience. Charlie Chaplin's immensely successful film The

Great Dictator (1940), Stanley Kubrick's satire on the Nazi regime Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964) My Fellow American (1996), Don't Drink the Water (1994) TV series, Yes Prime Minister (1986), Blue State (2007) are some films which come under this genre.

There are a bunch of vibrant creative film makers in India too who has used the medium of films as a powerful and effective weapon to unequivocally ventilate their views on socio-political issues. Satyajit Ray was an extraordinary auteur who dealt with political scene with finesse Apart from Apu Trilogy (1955-59) which portrayed the poverty-stricken rural India Calcutta Trilogy (1971-76) consisted of tales based on Calcutta in 1970s and Kingdom of Diamonds (1980) was a scathing political satire by Ray. Shyam Benegal was another veteran film maker who dealt with social themes in his movies Ankur (1973), Nishant (1975), Bhumika (1977) were some of his critically acclaimed films. His recent film Well Done Abba (2010) a political satire which bagged the National Film Award for the best film on social issues. There has been a horde of excellent film makers in India whose creative mind resonated with the impulses in the contemporary world. Rituparna Ghosh, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aparna Sen, Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair, Govind Nihalani are some of the connoisseurs who dealt with socio-political themes with vigour and vitality.

Anusha Rizvi, a journalist turned director came out with her directorial debut Peepli Live in 2010 under Aamir Khan Productions. It was the official entry of 83rd Oscar Academy Awards in 2010 in the foreign films' category. It is a disarmingly simple but disdainfully powerful film unravelling the depressing realities of contemporary India. Rizvi unleashes a biting satire on the inhuman, unethical, voyeuristic side of journalism and on the insincere and unscrupulous politicians. By brutally attacking the blood thirsty media, governmental agencies and politicians, she exposes the underlying real issue- the farmer suicides. She employs the magic of satire to expose the malaise that has crept into our political system and mass media. Through the satirical lens the film maker refracts the rural society, hypocritical politicians, insensitive bureaucracy, manipulative electronic media and finally arrives at the pathetic plight of Indian farmers. Taking us right into the heart of India, exposing the problems fringed with satire, she exposes the whole rotten Indian political system. Film critic Subhash Jha remarks:

To most of us out here sitting in the auditorium, farmers' suicide is just a headline. Read, regretted and then put to bed. Peepli Live is that savagely raw and hurtful wake-up call for the conscience which does not mince words. Yes it has very funny moments when death becomes a laughing raw-stock for the television camera. But Peepli Live is not a funny film.

Peepli is a remote village in the state of Mukhya Pradesh which happens to be reeling under the heat of a by-election when the movie opens. Two brothers Natha and Budhia ensnared in the inexorable vortex of an unpaid bank loan on their ancestral land are introduced in the very first scene itself. They are slighted by a politician when asked for help and are sardonically directed to commit suicide in order to avail the government

aid for farmers committing suicide. Manipulative Budhia convinces the naïve Natha that suicide is the only way out of their financial worries. Natha takes up the challenge for the family unintentionally, without having the minimum knowledge of the hustle and bustle he is going to create in the entire nation. News drop out of the village through a local correspondent which hits the headlines of television channels competing each other for higher TRP ratings. Once they get the whiff of the story, the obscure hamlet became the buzzing hub of OB vans with live coverages. An avalanche of pomp and circus ensued and the only one pertinent question remains is that “should Natha die or not?” Twenty four hour coverages are aired continuously with ultra modern lens capturing even the minutest movements in the Natha household.

As the frenzy peaks, cold drink kiosks and the tea stalls come up around Natha’s house giving a festive mood to the sleepy village. Opposition grabs the occasion as a potent time to unleash a scathing attack on the ruling party. The Government springs into action and the District Collector is ordered to take necessary steps to stop Natha from this staunch and painful decision. This results in a delightful scene where the caretakers of the Indian state try to avert Natha’s suicide by gifting him a ‘Lal Bahadur’ (red hand pump) under a rural development scheme. The State Government takes up the responsibility of Natha’s life and gives him police protection. He becomes a paw in the hands of the contesting politicians and a mayhem followed in which one person is smoldered to death beyond recognition. He is mistaken to be Natha and with this supposed death of Natha, all fanfare associated with his suicide is brought to an end. Everyone who has been eagerly waiting for the celebration of suicide slowly beats retreat, leaving behind the plastic strewn, polluted village. The Government denies Natha’s family compensation since his death cannot be considered under the category ‘suicide’ in official files. The state issues what is called Natha card to some selected groups, of which the Natha household is not eligible to apply. Finally the movie closes with a shot of Natha in a city, working as a labourer in a construction site with the very same uncertain and naïve expression in his eyes.

Peepli Live passes all tests of being a satire with flying colours. Rajeev Masand of CNN-IBN comments, “the satire is irresistible; the subtext, compelling. And yet neither shows itself up in any form of self-seriousness. The comic writing is immaculately inspired”. Satire is a mode through which one can expose and criticize the world of ugliness, cruelty and oppression. It is deviation from the normal or desirable that pricks the mind of a satirist which makes him unleash his satiric weapons on the reprehensible elements. The director sharpens her satiric discourse by complementing it with effective use of humour and irony. The time, locale, characters and images all function like double edged swords with literal meaning at one end and a deeper underlying meaning at the other. The director exhibits supreme talent in showcasing the real India and she has not spared a single person from the spiky edge of her biting satire. The tongue-in-cheek gaze gloss over all that is incongruous in contemporary Indian society. The vote-bank politics of unscrupulous politicians comes under severe attack. The film fiercely exposes the cheap ego clash between the Centre Minister and Chief Minister of the opposition ruling

state. A local Dalit leader donates Natha with a colour television set for his daring decision which reverberates the notorious statement of Marie Antoinette, 'If they don't have food, give them cakes!' It is really ironical to watch both the Lal Bahadur and the television occupying Natha's otherwise crammed and unelectrified one room home.

The inhuman and bizarre bureaucracy too is severely reprimanded in the film. Their cold and indifferent attitude is best captured in the nonchalant refrain of the Agriculture Secretary "we must wait for the court's order". When the state officials go through their entire gamut of garibi-hatao schemes, they realize the inadequacy of schemes to prevent a farmer from committing suicide. The unscrupulous and unsentimental side of television journalism whose sole concern for scoops and TRP ratings are hilariously portrayed in the movie. It is not difficult to identify real life situations and journalists who are good humouredly ridiculed Peepli Live. As the words spread on the contemplated suicide of Natha, multitude of television news channels descend on the non-descript village transforming it into a veritable circus ground. The unwinking camera eyes zooms into the very interiors of Natha household scanning the minute details of the famished house, conducting interviews of neighbours and friends and going even to the extent of making a story out of the faeces of Natha. Peepli Live finds a resonance in Frank Capra's 1941 classic 'Meet John Doe' It also echoes the dark humour employed by Syam Benegal. Kishore Ram writes on black humour.

The most important trait of black humour is that it refuses to treat tragic material tragically. It allows the reader to see the dark side of reality and makes him laugh rather than despair.... No subject is consecrate for the black humourist: social customs, traditions, philosophies, taboos, bureaucratic systems and ideologies are mocked, subverted or desanctified. (94)

The film also has a flavour of Jewish wry since it tries to create a comic situation out of an extremely serious and morbid one. An extremely tragic and pertinent issue of farmer suicides is exposed by treating it using various innovative methods. The director prudently borrows the techniques from the Theatre of Absurd as well for her satirical indictment of the contemporary society. The stringent ironical and satirical vein gives the director an added license for extending the story to any level possible. The film is a microcosm of the macrocosmic Indian society distended with TV channels belligerently fighting each other for exclusive news stories oblivious of any human sentiments and of politicians who are solely concerned with their personal gains. Peepli Live seeks to push us across the line that divides between a detached laughter and genuine concern. Beneath the laughter, the director is able to make the viewer ponder over the pathetic situation of our country and the deplorable predicament of marginalized citizens. The film is a hard hitting jolt on the conscience and an eye-opener for the educated, moneyed urban class, showcasing what is going on in the name of 'live coverages' and 'breaking news' by TV channels, the empty promises of politicians and how the victims of poverty of the world's largest democracy is finally left to suffer and perish. Peepli Live becomes a metaphor of contemporary Indian society.

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