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DARK COMEDY - Iqbal Masud

English August is a masterpiece of satire

Re-viewing of Dev Benegal's English, August after two years, on the occasion of its commercial release here, prompts reflections very different from those on the first occasion. Then the book of Upamanyu Chatterjee dominated one's consciousness. One felt Dev had not transcended it.

Now such questions have become irrelevant. One liked the novel for its innovation, its peculiar "rootlessness" while looking at familiar things Upamanyu was a post-modern, witty Sadaat Hasan Manto. The novel harked back to Forsterian satire, even to A.J.Ackerley's Hindoo Holiday (1932). It did not quite belong to the Rushdian post-post-what-ever-you-wish genre.

These felicities dwindle in the film and rightly so. Both novel and film are about cultural division and the farce that such division generates. In the film it is a dark farce, a finally hopeless tragedy. Nothing wrong with that. What else can you say at the dawn of the Hawala Age? The first striking thing about the film is rather brilliant script (Dev and author Upamanyu Chatterjee). The tale of a metropolitan westernised college product thrown into the heart-breaking ugliness, inconsequentiality and sheer hopelessness of a mofussil town through the selection for IAS. One would have loved to watch the IAS viva (interview) which selected the hero. Agastya (a friend got in by quoting the full text of "Was this the face that launched a thousand slips?")

The intellectual God here is Marcus Aurellus, not Marlowe. Think about that and the cultural confusion becomes farcical/tragic. Both the book and the film extract the last nuance from this mix, but the film does it in a more tragic fashion.

It's all watchable, partly good fun. But the film conjures up Agastya's nightmare very effectively by its production design and the performances. Anuradha Parikh, the designer, has brought a new dimension to the cultural clash. As one watched the impact of the merciless sun, of the noise and vagrant moods of a small town on Agastya, one felt the stab of a forgotten misery. How absolutely right, one said.

The performances lift the film to an original and unexplored level. Salim Shah is an excellent artist but I didn't think he had the makings of a Master Satirist (who is not a mere satirist) in the role of the Collector. Veerendra Saxena's cameo as the musician-civil servant is magical. Every player has given performances of a high quality.

But where does all this lead to? The hero realises the essential contradiction between what he believes to be "right" (despite his sexual bizzaria and "western"

mockery) and the compulsions of service. There's a problem here. We are given no standard of excellence - Aurelius doesn't really count and Gandhi has become that obscenely supported statue in the market. Somewhere Sita is casually brought in but the author/director's heart are not really in superficial revivalism.

There's a third way. Of standing up and doing your individual decent bit without the help of Aurelius, Gandhi or Sita.

Our hero does just that and this bit is asked by a tribal activist : "Who will send the water trucks to us after you go?" A ruthless question. Impaled by this thrust, the hero retreats to Calcutta and to the late joys of Bengal Renaissance.

A bleak, heroic acceptance of defeat. But even Agastya is a "romantic". Towns like Madna breed sex scandals and corruption and yet they also generate a hunger for a better life. They will breed their own saviours beyond the understanding of Agastya's divided self.

Somewhere the Collector says : "Development bacchon ke khel nahin." (Development is not child's play.) After watching English, August I said, "Aur na novelists/film directors ka."

But that's a personal reaction. English, August remains one of the finest films of recent years.