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Indo-Anglican fiction yes, but what about cinema ?

If one were to make a list of the international film classics of our time, I would include Fellini's "Eight and a Half", Kurosawa's "Ran", the Taviani brothers' "Kaos", Gaal's "Mephisto", Merchant's "Room With a View". Now try this exercise. Let us place them in the type of categories that our national film awards use. Would "Eight and a Half" come under "best popular film providing wholesome entertainment?" And "Mephisto" make it to "best film on other social issues?" And "Ran" on "best film on family welfare"? Yes, these categories sound absurd. One need hardly labour the point. How can one assign such officious and sanctimonious titles to narrative fiction film? The standard awards the world over are for Best Cinematography, Best Screenplay, Editing and so on, which we also have. But why must we hammer home the point that we are a developing country which is using the medium of film to get us out of our developing status?

We also have nationals awards for regional language films. Of these English is slotted as one because though it is not a regional language, it happens to be one of the "unscheduled" languages of India listed in the constitution. That too is incongruous but then our film policy-wallahs would consider the making of films in English incongruous. Yet, such films continue to be made. As many of us speak and write in English and conduct our official work in English as well, there ought not to exist any incongruity in making films in Indian English. After all, our fiction in English has already made a mark internationally. Pradip Kishen and Arundhati Roy have made a couple of films in English - "In which Annie Gives It Those One" and "Electric Moon". Their "Massey Sahib" has the Sahib speaking in English, of course. And many contemporary films do include words, phrases and dialogue in English. Since films made in English are obviously not mainstream films, because of distribution, exhibition and other problems, they remain oddities at best and jarring embarrassments at worst. And in the annual national awards exercise any entry in English generally wins the Best Feature Film in English award. The maker of such a film in any case enters it in this specific category not knowing where else it will fit. Of course it is left to the discretion of the jury to waive such categories if they so choose to override them.

This year Dev Benegal's "English, August" based on Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel of the same name predictably won the Best Feature Film in English award. Which is a pity. It deserved far better. First of all it is the best translation of a novel to film. Secondly, it is, perhaps for the first time, that one of our films displays deft, light touches of humour, is witty and satirical without becoming slapstick, crude and farcical. This is by no means a small contribution to the Indian cinematic tradition. It is, moreover, quite a devastating indictment of the ways in which our country is sought to be governed and the myriad contradictions of class, education and attitude that exist in our society. The film is also one of the most carefully structured and polished films seen in recent years.

One would go so far as to say that it highlights the most striking and telling aspects of Chatterjee's novel while playing down some of its weaknesses. Chatterjee's protagonist Agastya Sen is a kind of Walter Mitty character who thinks of his family and friends and encounters of his past while experiencing something in the present. In the novel this is a kind of interrupted interior monologue. How would a film-maker present this on screen? A repeated use of the flashback technique would become irritating after a while. But by a judicious use of cutaways and interspersed scenes and statements, the viewers are presented with a simultaneity of past and present. The most vivid of these is the scene when Agastya is having dinner at the collector Srivastava's house and suddenly Agastya's two matronly Bengali aunts are cackling away about his parents' marriage. Far from detracting from the dining room scene that is being presented, this insert actually helps our understanding of Agastya's character. The technique is used so skillfully and in such a sophisticated manner that one actually waits for these inserts to fill us in about Agastya's inner private life.

Like R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi*, Chatterjee's *Madna* also comes to life in the film. You actually get an image of its small-town dimensions, narrow alleys and streets and the people who inhabit it. Most powerfully presented is the almost visceral impact of the heat and dust of Madna. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's "Heat and Dust" and the subsequent film by Merchant - Ivory were unable to convey this palpable sense of the heat and dust which so characterise the Indian condition. Benegal's camera captures a kind of heat shimmer, the birds dropping dead from the sky, the constant swirling of fans, the flicking of sweat from sweat-soaked bodies, the yellow glare that envelopes the town, the stuffy claustrophobic rooms, the dust raised by traffic and the ennui and tedium of life in a small town.

Perhaps the greatest skill is in the cinematic presentation of the dialogue. In earlier films, Indian English tends to make one somewhat uncomfortable. Naseeruddin Shah as Goswami, the forest officer in "Electric Moon" for instance, with his babu English tends to speak more as a caricature than as a character. As also Leela Naidu with her pucca English accent. But Rahul Bose, the actor portraying Agastya Sen, with his restrained presence, speaks and acts convincingly as the young civil servant who is "the English type." So do the collector Srivastava and the numerous petty officials whom we hear in the course of the film.

Agastya Sen's dilemma in the novel is very well depicted in the film. When Sen is asked what he studied in college he replies, "English, sir" and wishes it had been something more respectable like physics, mathematics, economics or law, subjects that at least sound as though one had to study for the exams. This is a central dilemma not only for Agastya Sen but his entire generation. Or, as the novel says, "for the generation that does not oil its hair."

The film manages to convey the incongruity of Sen's situation in small-town Madna

with a superb juxtaposition of scenes. The onslaught of personal questions that seems to be a defining characteristic of most Indians, educated or otherwise, is delightfully dealt with in the film, selectively choosing snatches of conversation from the novel. For instance, when asked how old he is, Agastya replies, "twenty-eight" though he is twenty-four, because he is in a lying mood. He is then asked, "Are you married?", and he has to respond constantly to the demand that he classify himself. He answers,, "Yes," wondering for a second whether he should add "twice." When asked to talk about his "Mrs." He answers, "She is in England. She is English anyway, but she has gone there for a cancer operation. She has cancer of the breast." And then, in the film, he spreads out his fingers to show the size of the tumour and then the size of the breast, whereas in the novel this gesture remains in his mind.

The episode of the frog in Agastya Sen's resthouse bathroom in the film is one of the truly memorable comic scenes seen in our films. It comes to have a central significance in the film unlike in the novel where it forms merely yet another aspect of his life in Madna. In the film you actually have this enormous frog hopping about in front of the camera and one can sense Agastya's exasperation in having to share his bathroom with it since no one can catch it and remove it. The comedy arises out of Sen's helplessness because of his urban sensibilities in contrast to those of his servant Vasant who thinks the frog will bring good luck. One would never have thought that this somewhat minor incident in the novel could be projected into this richly comic scene in the film. While a frog is merely symbolic in a novel, in a film a frog is a frog, apart from the symbolic weight it carries. In the same way the arrival of the monsoon as shown in the film, with the camera lovingly giving us view after view of lush green land, has a greater impact than in the novel.

Though many turned up to see "English, August" when it was screened recently in Delhi, one wonders what kind of exposure it is going to get. It should not be allowed to fade into obscurity which seems to be the fate of English language films in our country.