



Cartography of Representations: Western Melodrama and Indian Cinema

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Abstract: Understanding the melodramatic intervention in Indian cinema would require us to reformulate the insights of Western melodramatic studies. But it is essential to remember that any attempt to sum up the theoretical formulation of the Western melodramatic studies is a mammoth task and might end up in formulating certain simplistic and generalized observations. The situation becomes all the more complicated when we try to comprehend the nature of melodramatic interventions in Indian cinemas because melodramatic situations differ from county to country. It is essentially a historically and socially conditioned mode of experience. So what may constitute a melodramatic mode of expression in the West may not be the same in India. This paper seeks to narrate the conflict and confrontation between the sacred and the secular and how differently they are perceived by the two countries. In the final analysis, the paper deals with the interface between the Western concept of melodrama and its influence on Indian cinema and how the great Indian directors incorporate indigenous forms of melodrama to overcome that influence.

Keywords: humanism, revolution, bourgeoisie, hegemony, ideology, sacralize, melodrama, mise-en-scene, pantomime, *nautanki*, *tamasha*, *jatra*, *dastan*, *jannat*, *behest*, *rasa*, *karma*,

The word ‘melodrama’ originally means a drama accompanied by music. Rousseau’s *Pygmalion* (Chisholm, 1911) written in 1762 was perhaps the first full scale melodrama, where he sought a new emotional expressivity through the mixture of soliloquy, pantomime and orchestral accompaniment. The word thereafter, came to characterize a popular drama derived from pantomime. Music was an important element in this melodramatic aesthetic from the very beginning. Though we are tempted to decipher melodrama as constant among literary modes of all epochs its origins can be traced in the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath. It is at this epistemological moment that the bourgeois took power from the aristocracy by



assimilating revolution and maneuvering cultural hegemony in the name of ordinary citizens. In fact the Revolution marked the arrival of the moment that symbolically and really sounded the final liquidation of the traditional sacred and its representative institutions, the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society and the invalidation of the literary forms- tragedy, comedy of manners-that depended on such a society. A new world, a new chronology, a new religion, a new morality lay within the grasp of the revolutionary legislator and particularly in the power of its verbal representation. Revolution thus attempted to sacralize the law itself yet it produced melodrama to mark the triumph of virtue at a critical juncture of history when incessant struggle against enemies both within and without loomed large and the quest of not only confronting them but also expunging remained supreme in the minds of revolutionaries. Thus melodrama becomes the principal mode for unraveling, demonstrating and ‘making operative the essential moral universe in the post sacred era’.

It is to be noted that the process of de-sacralization that was unleashed by the Renaissance era, passing through the momentary compromise of Christian humanism and gathered momentum during the Enlightenment reached its ultimate moment of convulsion during the Revolution. However, while the forces of de-sacralization was gaining momentum ever since the inauguration of the Renaissance, by the end of the Enlightenment a renewed thirst for the sacred was evident as a reaction to this process. This urge for de-sacralization can be seen as an attempt to reassert the need for some version of the sacred, in its traditional, categorical unifying form.

Melodrama therefore, captures the urge towards de-sacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms. But rather than tracing the historical roots of melodrama it would be more essential for us to explore what constitutes the world of melodramatic studies in the West. Though perceived mainly as a pejorative term for a long time the authoritative works of Peter Brooks(1995), Elsaesser(2009) proved melodramatic mode as an inescapable dimension of modern consciousness. And moving beyond convention of literary criticism melodrama has now emerged as an important analytical tool in everyday discussion of



any art as well as critical discussion of films- particularly Hollywood films of the 1940s and 50s. In the world of Western studies melodrama has been conceived in various ways but I would like to perceive melodrama not as a genre but as an imaginative mode helping us to unravel the elusive elements of this world.

Scholars across the spectrum have traced certain constitutive features of melodrama:- 1) it is essentially a form of representation in the post sacred era; 2) a sort of hyper dramatization is associated with this mode; 3) it postulates a kind of moral occult – the hidden yet operative domain of values that the drama through heightening attempts to make present within the ordinary; 4) a thrilling sense of excess lies in the heart of melodrama. Elsaesser points out that the film exhibits a ‘content under pressure’ that usually erupts in moments of excess. This excess may be regarded as a reverberation of the historical tensions of class, race and sex. Sirk(2011) points out popular melodrama offers a stylish refusal of the dailiness of the everyday. Brooks points out that melodrama shares an oblique relation with realism; it entails a series of stylized expressions; captures certain moments of hysteria when repressed affects are represented on the body. Elsaesser points out that melodrama is neither progressive nor conservative- it is an ambivalent form capable of various political inflections. Melodrama is also internally polyvalent, capable of a tension producing counterpoint between worrying ideologies; in the use of vocal inflections, mise-en –scene in everyday actions, melodrama can set a powerful blend of tension between a character’s physical embodiment and the expectation that we and the other character have of him or her. The melos or the music plays a key role in the melodrama. It punctuates the expression and dramatizes a given narrative. It has got functional and thematic unity and is less directly interested in the reassertion of the newness numinous for its own sake than in its ethical corollaries. It starts from an expression of anxiety brought out by a frighteningly new where the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provides the necessary social glue. It is not a moralistic drama but the ‘drama of morality’ embedded in a kind of aesthetic astonishment. Astonishment does not resolve the conflict over where the virtue and vice truly lies rather simply enhances the tension over the seemingly un-resolvable issues. The melodramatic rhetoric tends towards the inflated, its typical figures are hyperbole, antithesis and oxymoron; its elements are clearly visible in the plots which revolves



around the family relationship, star crossed lovers and forced marriages. The ideological message of melodrama lies in the triumph of the morally and emotionally emancipated bourgeois consciousness against the remnants of feudalism; an element of interiorization and personalization of primarily ideological conflicts together with metaphorical interpretation of class conflict is evident in all melodramatic ventures. Melodrama provides a sort of escapism in the post sacred era as its rise was essentially linked to the ban on speech in the unlicensed French theatre; it expresses the unspeakable truths and suppressed feelings. Though born in the womb of Revolution it produces a kind of status quo; it begins and wants to end in a space of innocence. Garden and rural homes are stereotypical locus of such emotions focusing on victim heroes and the recognition of their virtue. Elsaesacer points out that a characteristic feature of melodrama is its concentration on the 'point of view' of the victim; it involves a dialectic of pathos and actions- a give and take of too late 'and nick of the time' presenting the characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaeian conflict between good and evil. Finally, melodrama hails an alternative process of meaning making and the celebration of the irrational requiring the presence of an extra textual intelligence.

However, it is essential to remember that though these features are largely associated with most melodramatic projects yet any attempt to sum up the theoretical formulation of the Western melodramatic studies is a mammoth task and might end up in formulating certain simplistic and generalized observations. The situation becomes all the more complicated when we try to comprehend the nature of melodramatic interventions in Indian cinemas because melodramatic situations differ from county to country. It is essentially a historically and socially conditioned mode of experience. So what may constitute a melodramatic mode of expression in the West may not be the same in India. And the resolution to the conflict and confrontation between the sacred and the secular will be differently perceived by the two countries.

Melodrama appears as a significant structuring force in Indian cinema. Its genesis might be traced in the previous and parallel history of theatre. Born in the womb of theatres, Indian cinema bears the hallmarks of folk forms such as *nautanki* (farce), *tamasha* (baroque) etc which are rich in melodramatic expressions. But researches point out that melodrama arrived in India



namely through Parsi theatres. The Parsi theatre groups were highly mobile traversing through the country's big cities and small towns from Delhi to Calcutta and moving beyond the territorial land marks to Ceylon, Singapore, Burma, Malaysia and even to England. It is probable that Indian cinema gained its melodramatic contents through its contact with the West via the Parsi theatre but indigenous cultural pursuits like *nautanki*, *jatra*, *dastan* tradition also contributed in enriching this melodramatic tradition. Even if we refer to our classical times especially the plays of Kalidasa we find that they have introduced many a popular melodramatic interventions in the structure of Sanskrit language.

However, the concept of the traditional Sacred never lost its sway despite the advent of foreign rule accompanied by its scientific and rationalistic wave of thinking in India. The new line of thinking definitely modified our vision but religion still maintained its stronghold in our everyday life. If melodrama is seen as a soul of the soulless world of the West, a post-Sacred era form then the question naturally arises whether Indian socio cultural world ever got denuded of its Sacred elements to invite an era of re-sacralization. Moreover, the idea that evil will be vanquished by good is an epic truth nurtured in our national culture right from the days of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Not only the Hindu mythological tales or the *Bhagwat Gita* the victory of the virtue lies in the heart of other religions in India. The Buddhist law of *karma*, the Jain vision, the Islamic concept of *jannat* and *behest* –all proclaim the same. Hence, cinemas which draw inspiration from real life could amply collect raw material from its own soil to proclaim the victory of virtue rather than resorting to Western melodramatic tradition. Hence, understanding melodramatic interventions in the cinematic world of the sub-continent would require a more creative application of the Western melodramatic studies.

To the Western eyes it may appear that everything in India is steeped in a melodramatic connotation. But the reality is much more complex and complicated than assumed by them. While the traditional sacred did not face much crisis, waves of Western rational thinking started touching the life of Indians with the establishment of British rule. Bengal in particular witnessed a new awakening. Hence, Bengal might provide us with an interesting site to examine whether Western melodramatic studies can be applied to understand the melodramatic



interventions in the world of Bengali cinema. However, here I would like to mention Ravi. S. Vasudevan's (2011) view that any attempt to theorize the validity of the melodramatic mode in the Indian scenario must be in such a way as to reformulate the terms of modernity within which melodrama emerges, rather than reformulating the Western melodramatic insights. In the light of this contention let us try to examine the melodramatic modes evident in Bengali cinema.

Those who feel that popular films of Bengal are coterminous with melodrama need to realize that there are various ingredients of Bengali cinema which are extremely realist in its core. Things become clearer if we analyze which trends and characteristics are essentially melodramatic and which, despite being apparently melodramatic, are clear deviation from it and in this context whether Western melodramatic studies will help in unraveling the melodramatic intervention in Bengali cinema.

Mainak Biswas (2004) perceives that a melodramatic cycle started in 1953 and continued till the late 1960s. In this context unraveling the melodramatic interventions in Bengali cinema during this era becomes an easier task. This genre of films directed mainly by Ajoy Kar, Asit Sen, Agradut, Jatrik, Hiren Nag establish melodrama as an important narrative form. Music was an important ingredient of these films punctuating the stylized way of acting of the star cast. The films like *Shapmochon*, *Agniparikhsa*, *Haranosur*, *Saptapadi*, *Bipasa*, *Indrani* exhibited constitutive features of Western melodramatic studies. Mise-en-scene narrational songs, certain moments of hysteria, an element of excess ran through the veins of these movies. *Bipasa* and *Indrani* are filled with such thrilling excesses and hyper dramatizations. Most of the movies of this period are classic illustrations of Elsaesser's contention. The films of this era be it *Shapmochon* or *Saptapadi* are classic examples of drama of morality. *Haranoosur* and *Saptapadi* are rich in moments of astonishment, and *Saptapadi* and *Pathe Holo Deri* are filled with moments of ideological conflicts and at the same time they re-enforce a kind of status quo. Moral occults pervade films like *Shilpi* and *Shapmochon*. *Bipasa* is an interesting movie because though it is named after the central female protagonist played by Suchitra Sen it is actually a tale of a victim hero played by Uttam Kumar. *Haranosur*, *Pathe Holo Deri* are shot



with utmost perfection in the space of innocence depicted through the gardens and the rural scenario. Most of them carry the ideological message and proclaim the triumph of virtue. Thus all these films are representative cases of melodramatic mode of Bengali cinema of this era.

But the mere presence of certain melodramatic elements cannot designate a film to be melodramatic. This becomes apparent if we analyze certain other films made in the same period by Satyajit Ray. Ray's films are interesting mainly because his directorial zeal was in complete opposition to the melodramatic modes of representation. In fact, in 1948 while diagnosing the ills that affect the Indian commercial films Ray (2005) maintained that by a queer process of reasoning, movement was equated with action and action with melodrama. Needless to say Ray's films were overtly and covertly directed against the melodramatic excess. In fact in the words of Puline Kael (1990) the first film by the masterly Satyajit Ray –possibly the most unembarrassed and natural of directors-is quite a reverie about the life of an impoverished Brahmin family in a Bengali village Beautiful, sometimes funny and full of love it brought a new vision of India to the screen.

In 1955 Ray made *Pather Panchali* which was regarded as harbinger of a new era of film making. Shot in the rural landscapes it provides the space of innocence where melodrama thrives. In fact, the major climax in the film marked by the death of Indira Thakuran was a storm before the death of Durga, the sudden cry of agony of Sarbajoya after Harihar's arrival-all if mechanically and mindlessly analyzed can appear to be melodramatic. But any scholar of film studies will not fail to notice that Ray had depicted everything with a wonderful authenticity and precision. And the only element of excess if at all one notices here is that of modernist excess. The reticence, the economy of expression and the natural expression of the various characters devoid of any star cast makes *Pather Panchali* one of the greatest modernist projects. In fact, at the end of the film when Harihar, Sarbajoya and young Apu trundled way in the bullock cart towards what they hope will be a new life, a snakes slide furtively in the house. But this mise-en scene is not symptomatic of the moral occult rather a reflection of Ray's inclination to depict everything with vivid realistic flavor. However, his realist films often erupted in to melodramatic overtures without necessarily becoming a melodrama itself.



In 1955 when the wave of melodramatic films of Suchitra and Uttam mesmerized the viewers of Bengal, *Pather Panchali* created a separate niche for itself, signaling a new genre of realist film making. The review of the film in *Times of India* on 11 February 1956 comments : ‘it is absurd to compare *Pather Panchali* with any other Indian picture – for even the best of the pictures produced so far have been cluttered with....*Pather Panchali* makes a complete break with the world of make belief, of a mélange of the impossible.....’. Noted film scholar Sanjay Mukhopadhyay (2010) opines that Ray censures the excessiveness and melodrama in his films; Italian neorealism inspired him to resort to a narrative style which was shaped by the language of silence. Mukhopadhyay contends that before Ray a simple story telling technique in Indian Films was missing. Most of the Films are full of emphatic statements loaded with a lot of melodrama and exaggeration.

Now let us shift our attention to another film made by the same director in 1959, *Devi*. It embodies through its characters the conflict between the acceptance of orthodox Hindu superstitions and growth of skepticism and revolt. The story revolves around the father Kalikinkar Roy representing the Hindu orthodoxy, Umapasrad the younger son studying in Kolkata and representing the reformist zeal. Apart from them the elder son Tarapasrad completely dominated by the father, his wife Harisundari betwixt and caught between acceptance of orthodoxy and rejection and Dayamoyee wife of Umapasrad -are the other characters centering whom the story line is woven in *Devi*. It is interesting to note that Kaikinkar is an ardent devotee of Durga, goddess conceived as the slayer of Mahishasur, a demon symbolising evil. Ray’s invocation of deity incarnate in spirit within the body of the lively, vivacious young Dayamoyee the tender pleasure that Kalikinkar derives when Daya massages his feet, the hypnotic eyes of the goddess transforming in the eyes of the innocent Daya, Kalikinkar chanting of ‘ma ma’, the clouds of incense causing Daya to faint chanting of slokas by the crowd of worshippers, failure of the miraculous power of Dayamoyee and the ultimate disappearance of dayamoyee into misty field-all build up a perfect melodramatic narrative.



The mise-en-scène created in the films, depiction of Kalikinkar Roy as a victim of superstition, use of lights as well as startling cut in the films, often heightened expressions make *Devi* a classic illustration of melodramatic mode yet there has been a perception that instead of developing this story as a moving human drama Satyajit Ray has given it a documented treatment taking meticulous care to capture the period and the locale in intimate detail but skipping over the dramatic moments in a calculated effort to bypass entanglement.

The difference in perception whether a cinema is melodramatic in its mode of expression or belong to a different genre will be conditioned not only by the politico social cultural milieu of the country in which the cinema is created as also by the socio cultural psychological make-up of the reviewer of the film. This explains why Ray's modernist projects are often perceived as melodramatic in the eyes of a Western theoretician. However, to understand the reality one cannot be oblivious of the fact that emotional exuberance is a natural attribute of the Indian people at large, though scientific and rational principles have been accepted by the people at large yet they have not been able to make inroads into the private life of the individuals; development is measured here not in terms of economic data alone but also in terms of happiness of its population. Thus the Western melodramatic studies cannot evolve any universally accepted formulas rather one must appreciate that the Aristotelian poetics which shaped European thinking does not influence the Indian vision of life. The Indian 'rasa' theory speaking of the nine strings of emotion needs to be appreciated in order to explore the melodramatic interventions in Indian cinema. Ray has always displayed a wonderful control over the narrative style. Images sometimes play truant but apart from his last few films Ray was the absolute master of speech. In his last few Films like *Agantuk*, *Shakha Prashakha*, *Ganashatru* Ray was a bit theatrical and emotional. His Supreme control over words was missing as he used dialogue whenever there is an opportunity.

What was perceived as melodramatic streaks in the last 3 films of Ray perhaps a resonance in then masterful exploration of human relationship and in the intensity of an indoor family drama. Ray reiterated that film like *Shakha Prashkha* is a simple facts simply told. There are no cinematic gymnastics or flirtation with form. Though *Shakha Prashakha* exhibits precipice of



melodrama and bathos, Ray has struggled hard between drama and melodrama and has pulled his film back from the brink. His pursuit of truth perhaps helped Ray to salvage his narrative from melodramatic excess and made it a great piece of Humanism.

Thus what is required is no blind application of Western melodramatic studies rather it is essential to assert that melodrama is a form of vernacular model that expresses the contradictions of modern sensibility. As all stereotypical knowledge cages one's imagination one needs to appreciate that no homogenous understanding of melodrama is also possible. It can only be understood in the light of difference rather than similarity. So in order to unravel the melodramatic intervention in films of Ray what is required is not complete abandonment of the western theoretical formulations but a creative adaptation of these principles suitable to our indigenous conditions. Ray's affinity with all the human species, acceptance of Human limitation, rejoicing in the human capacities, has often been misinterpreted as melodramatic from Western perspectives. Nevertheless, deeply imbued with Bengali society Ray's Films reach out beyond cultural differences to ignite a universal flame of humanity. He maintained a symbiotic unnerving interdependence between humanism and realistic authenticity. Those who think that Ray's classic neorealist zeal disappeared in his later works could not appreciate the Indian dignity and the intricate use of 'rasa' by Ray in his cinematic endeavours. It must be borne in mind that though Ray was much influenced by the Western artistic, literary and musical traditions. But at the same time his films were also influenced by a plethora of non-western, sometimes, uniquely Bengali sensibilities. Thus Ray instead of following the melodramatic conventions adhered to a natural realism. The real success of Ray perhaps lies in the fact that though after the plots of his films had melodramatic connotation, his directorial endeavours never deviated from the path of social realism that is represented in the films. This is more so because Ray never considered cinema as an art form, but a language. Hence the melodramatic form which was very popular when Ray was entered the world of films, could not stifle his 'language'. Therefore, let us conclude by recounting the words of Ray (2005) that cinema is a language defined by fade-ins, fade-outs, quick-cuts, camera angles, editing styles and music with classical flavor.



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