

Realities that Persuade”: Analysing the Cinematography of “Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness” Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and “Rubaru Roshni” by Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal

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Abstract. The act of persuasion is an inherent quality of documentaries. The Indian documentaries “Amoli: Priceless” (2018), directed by Avinash Roy and Jasmine Kaur, and “Rubaru Roshni” (2019), directed by Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal, navigate the emotions of pain, loss, and reconciliation. These pieces of work mark notable changes in the cinematography of Indian documentaries. “Amoli” investigates the dark underbelly of child sex racketing in India and how innocent mothers and children are the victims, and “Rubaru Roshni” is an anthology of tales of people healing through forgiveness in time. Both these documentary films have an emotional take on representing stories. Drawing on Stella Bruzzi’s theory of new documentary, this paper will look at the changing dynamics of Indian documentary production and its purgation of meaning.

Index Terms- Documentaries, Cinematography, Documentary production, New Documentary.

I Introduction

Documentaries capture the realities of life through a camera. Breaking the fourth wall it connects with the viewers in a deeper level. In India, documentaries have always been rooted in the country and the state. Then it was taken up by individuals who narrated the plight of the people. “As Patwardhan, among others, introduced the documentary as an essential part of the activist’s tool kit has been a favoured mode of liberal critical discourse in India (Battaglia, 2018). In the continued spate of communal violence in the 1990s (persisting to date), the state had increasingly unraveled as an indifferent if not unfair arbiter of secular justice, provoking the documentary to turn towards an anti-state as well as anti-right stance” (Hariharan, 68).

The format in which documentaries were shot also changed. The camera played an integral part in recording actual events. It thus became the third eye. Following a “Cinema Verite” style the filmmakers wanted to record reality as it is without much alterations. The belief was whatever was recorded or seen through the camera was real. Showing the truth became the motto of documentary cinema.

The impact the documentary films have on the nation is not a trivial matter. Many issues that the media failed to touch upon were filmed by documentary filmmakers. A prime example would be Anand Patwardhan and his political documentaries. Patwardhan was vocal and protested against the government through his works. *Jai Bhim Comrade* is one such movie where he focuses on the suicide of a Dalit man as his protest against caste discrimination.

With time and tide, the need for documentaries to stand for the sentiments of the people didn't change. The formats of documentary filmmaking changed with technology. The filmmakers still make use of that technology to make an impact on society through documentaries. This also means that documentaries are not what it used to be anymore. With changes in formats, the form has become more cinematically appealing and stories are narrated in a manner that stirs the viewers' souls.

II Stella Bruzzi's "New Documentary Theory"

1. Challenging Traditional Documentary Categorizations

New Documentary is a term in the book *New Documentary* Second Edition used by Bruzzi to refer to documentaries evolving or breaking away from a set style of documentary filmmaking. She states that documentaries are performative, hence differing from Nichols' classification of documentaries. According to Bill Nichols, performativity was when the directors involved themselves in the film. "With most social practices, where more than one way of doing things is possible and where more than one set of values or beliefs exist, different approaches must contend with each other. Dominant values must struggle to remain dominant. Alternative values must struggle to gain legitimacy. We enter contested terrain where different ideal and values compete for our allegiance. This competition gets played out in an ideological arena rather than by coercive means. Dominant and alternative practices seek to persuade us of their value rather than physically force us to comply. (Force remains a last resort.) Persuasion, though, requires a means of representing an acceptable way of doing things, a desirable course of action, a preferable solution that makes these options ones we will feel disposed to make our own. Persuasion requires communication, and communication depends on a means of representation, from written languages to body language, from television to film, from video to the web. These sign systems are the fundamental means of persuasive representation." (Nichols, 103)

2. The Performative Aspect of Documentaries

While Nichols writes authoritatively on the persuasion technique of documentaries, Bruzzi criticizes his categorization of documentaries into 5 categories and how these tend to overlap with each other (Bruzzi, 4). Bruzzi identifies with Renov in the view, "it is important to recall that the documentary is the cinematic idiom that most actively promotes the illusion of immediacy insofar as it forswears 'realism' in favour of a direct, ontological claim to the 'real'. Every documentary issues a 'truth claim' of a sort, positing a relationship to history which exceeds the analogical status of its fictional counterpart." (Bruzzi, 5). Bruzzi in her introduction of her book, "New Documentary", stresses that documentary is never reality and that the spectators are "far more straightforward" to believe that it is reality "documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other." (Bruzzi, 6).

III Case Studies; “A Girl In The River ” & “ Rubaroo Roshni ”

As a survivor of an attempted honour killing the documentary shows the journey of Saba of Pakistan who her father and uncle shot. Saved by the river, Saba is forced by her community to forgive her family.

The director drives the documentary entirely from Saba's point of view and how her determination changes from the beginning to the end. The director explains that the documentary is short because it perfectly captures her transition to an interview given to The International Documentary Association (Jones).

Since the documentary is emotionally packed, the camera angles used are close-up shots, often emphasizing the gravity of the situation. Situated in natural lighting and setting, the documentary brings out the rawness in film, making it closer to real life. The background of the interviewees is not blurred to show the social life they are in.

Story of Survival and Forgiveness

Using the deep focus technique, each detail of Saba's life is shown. This helps take the viewers through a journey of resistance, resilience, and finally, resignation to societal norms pressurizing her to forgive her father and uncle.

Rubaroo Roshni

Exploring Faith and Redemption

Three stories of the destruction of lives and renewal of faith are “Rubaroo Roshni.” Three murders and three murderers and their path toward faith are beautifully portrayed by Bhatkal. The camera is static most of the time and often amplifies the space in the background suggesting what has been left of them after the horrifying incidents (Jha). Starting from Avantika Maken's bitter rage to her final reconciliation with the murderer Bhatkal has been careful enough to emotionally pack the whole journey.

The next story is of a brutally murdered nun the camera shows an empty field where she was stabbed to death multiple times, almost surreal so that the viewers feel the wind that's dancing on the field reciting the story. The natural bright light almost suggests something holy a Godly act of forgiveness being enacted. The murdered nun's sister of faith forgives the murderer she ties a rakhi signifying their bond.

The third story is of Kia Scherr who lost her family to 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks. Including the clippings of the terror attacks, Kia's story gets more rawness and authenticity. Using the effective composition of frames and lighting the viewers get a feeling of the importance of moving on and making peace with life.

IV Conclusions

Towards the “New Documentary”

Comparative Analysis: Performative Aspects and Emotional Storytelling

Both documentaries portray the subjective emotive aspects of their subjects yet the methods chosen are distinctive and unique. “A Girl in the River” showcases a cause for a legal change in Pakistan while “Rubaroo Roshni” is charged with holistic subtlety in the portrayal of characters.

In both documentaries, the performative aspects are evident but are used to the potential of the directors. Documentaries tell stories of real individuals and the rawness of their story has to be maintained. The director then becomes the medium to tell their story and the camera the eye. The effective manipulation of the craft lies in the artistic capacity of the director. Thus, both these documentaries pay homage to the performativity put forward by Bruzzi by exerting themselves in their art and bringing out the best for the audience.

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