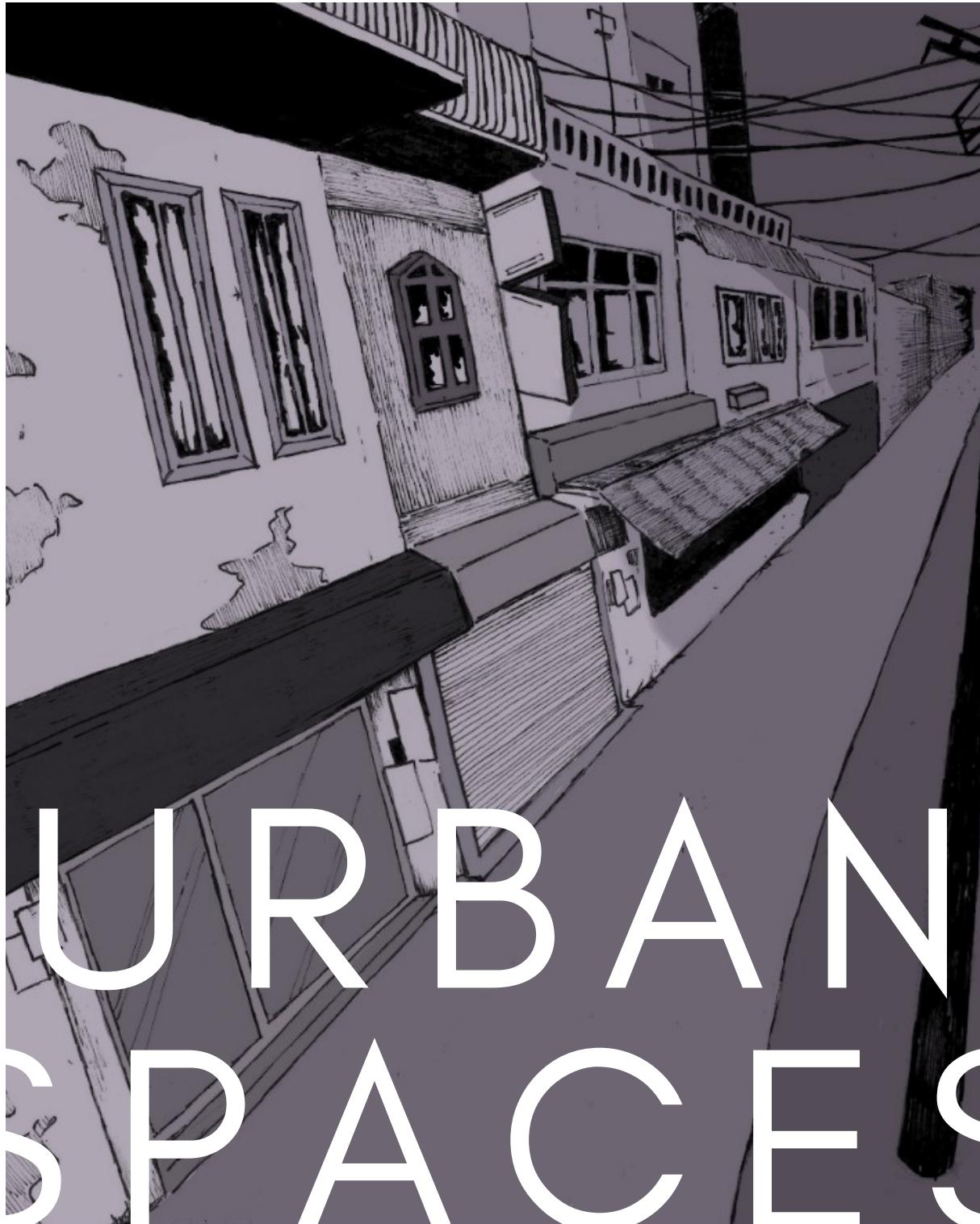


CHALCHITRA DARPAN

2019-2020



# URBAN SPACES

THE UNDERGRADUATE FILM JOURNAL  
CELLULOID

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URBAN SPACES  
2019-2020





MIRANDA HOUSE  
UNIVERSITY OF  
DELHI



CELLULOID  
THE FILM SOCIETY  
OF MIRANDA HOUSE

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*Acknowledgements*

Dear Readers,

It is with great pleasure and elation that we present to you, the inaugural edition of *Chalchitra Darpan*, Miranda House Film Club's academic journal. We are proud to be Delhi University's first ever undergraduate journal, and for providing a platform to undergraduate scholarship from around the Subcontinent. The articles embody the diversity of cityscapes across South Asia, and the scholarship is emblematic of the untapped potential of undergraduate students. These were written by your peers from across the span of the subcontinent and I hope their arguments, all cogently presented, will inspire your own line of inquiry into the field of film and media studies. These young film scholars have carved a niche for themselves, with many of them presenting papers for the first time.

The organization and management of this undergraduate journal would not have been possible without the sustained enthusiasm, dedication, hard work, and collective persistence of a number of people. We would like to begin by thanking the convenors of Celluloid - Professor Gorvika and Professor Shweta Sachdeva Jha. We express thanks to the speakers of our panel on 'Exploring Kolkata through the Native Lens' - Kaushik Bhaumik, Partho Datta and Abhija Ghosh for beginning a thought-provoking discussion on urban spaces which inspired the subject matter of this journal.

We are grateful to Tanuj Raut of University College Irvine, Department of Philosophy for inspiring us to take up this endeavour with the Undergraduate Journal of Philosophy, Falsafa, His words of advice have been vital in creating this journal.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the Celluloid Union 2019-20 for their continued assistance and encouragement. We must thank our President Devika Bhatnagar and Vice-President Prachi Dutia for their unwavering support, patience and regular discussions about the journal ensuring that we were making progress.

The success of Chalchitra Darpan would have been impossible without the tireless diligence of our fantastic editorial and design teams.

And finally a heartfelt thanks to our authors and all those who submitted to our journal. We were amazed by the response our call for papers received. The exemplary quality of thought and ideas presented intrigued us and we hope you are intrigued by it too.

And finally, we thank you for giving us your time and reading the journal!

Giitanjali & Oli  
Editors-in-Chief

*A Note from the President*

The academic session 2019-20 has been extraordinary for Celluloid as the society has taken numerous leaps in the fields of film screenings, filmmaking as well as film studies. The activities and events conducted have strengthened the pillars of communication and academic analysis of films. ‘Chalchitra Darpan’ is a further manifestation of the society’s core beliefs in order to encourage our peers to not consider films as mere entertainment.

As students, we have the power to drive the dynamics of the present understanding of films. We believe that this undergraduate students’ research journal will be a promising step in highlighting the importance of background research, backstories and subjective interpretations of films.

I would like to commend Giitanjali, Oli and the team of editors for their hard work and pioneering attitude for the first edition of the journal. Further, I would like to express the society’s gratitude towards our Principal, Ma’am Nanda and our convenors Prof. Gorvika, Prof. Shweta for their constant guidance and support. I would also like to thank our administrative and support staff for helping us throughout the process.

Through ‘Chalchitra Darpan’, the society aims at providing a platform for young minds to contribute to the academic developments in films. We hope this enhances our abilities to question, examine and inspect and furthers a journey towards a new era of cinema.

Devika  
President, Celluloid

*A Note on Design*

The juggernaut behind the design of the journal was simplicity. But this simplicity was not at the cost of creative design. The cover has a classic template and an unornamented font. The dissolution of the theme is an ode to how often the geography of a film is unconsciously dissolved as passive. This is a leitmotif that runs throughout the journal, in an attempt to bring to life, the characters that ‘spaces’ are. Coherently, a solid block cityscape sits at the foot at the end of all articles. The palate is primarily black-and-white with a handful of coloured images; my intention was to grant a sense of longevity to Chalchitra Darpan. As a distinct highlight, colour has seeped into the title pages of articles, each of which also boast of a uniqueness owed to the differences in the placement of text.

Khushi  
Design & Illustrations

Most of the illustrations have hatching details and screentones of varying intensities since I wanted texture to make for the absence of colour. I took note of what the articles and movies featured and combined them for the individual pieces while aiming for the cover to be emblematic of the theme of the magazine, a semi-realistic take on an Indian urban street, a little less rustic than I'd originally intended, to make it compatible with the running graphics of the cityscape. I focused on mostly three levels of lighting and subsequently adjusted the screentones and for some with darker subject matters, I made use of negative space. I worked on portraying the subjects symbolically as well through episodic sketches to convey their similarity to movie stills while keeping with the style of book illustrations.

Prasanta  
Illustrator

*Editorial*

1

**Cruising San Junipero**

Tracing the Impossibility and Possibilities of a Queer Utopia  
*Anushka Maheshwary*

11

**Lost in Isolation**

Evaluating Escapism in Ritesh Batra's Photograph  
*Anushree Joshi*

31

**Cognitive & Corporeal Enclosures**

A Foucauldian Study of Trapped (2017) and Rear Window (1954)  
*Bhumika Singh*

45

**MIRRORING CONNECTIONS IN RAO'S MUMBAI**

An Analysis of Dhobi Ghat  
*Saman Waheed*

63

**The Bollywood Reel**

Delhi in Moving Images  
*Srija Sanyal*

75

**The Silence of the City Street**

A Path that Frustrates Life Expectations  
*Priyantha Fonseka*

87

**Travels of Bollywood Cinema: From Bombay to LA**

By Anjali Gera Roy & Chua Beng Huat  
*Suhasini Das Gooptu*

95

**Urban Spaces and Anonymity in Aamis**

Interview with Bhaskar Hazarika  
*Arundhati Chowdhury & Bala Panchanathan*

*Editorial*

Looking back at the past year, there are some serious contenders for what were the most tragicomic misadventures our journal went through, and considering them all in tandem, if one could, reveals a pattern for some unique and important journeys the world, and our perceptions of the urban space have gone through. This has been a year of excesses, of burgeoning overflows in systems, in the natural progression of incredibly oppressive structures. In these times we have also assumed our space within the city—the city of subjugation, of “growth”, of disdain and of misery.

In the terribly mundane and uniquely calamitous dimensions of the city, we have traversed and navigated these spaces--living in our own enclosures, with the city within grasp and yet completely out of reach, the temptation to make metaphors out of this condition presents itself. But the brutal geographies of the urban space have also exposed themselves in these uncertain times. Questions continually arise about the popular perceptions of the city.

What does it mean to inhabit the “postcolonial” urban space? How do the people that inhabit these spaces interact with each other? What is the city in the cinematic imagination of neoliberal India?

As inhabitants of South Asia, the peculiarity of the South Asian urban space, which becomes one of the major focuses of the journal, cannot be delineated from their colonials past(s). The cultural stimuli of the urban space, through migration and synthesis of traditions, all processes initiated by colonial and imperial expansion, become spaces both for liberation and entrapment and assume importance within popular imaginations. Exploring these complex relationships becomes vital at this point in the Anthropocene.

In the last year, we have seen the city both as a space for abolitionist aspirations of protests, revolution and dissent, as well as a space for state repression, projection of nationalistic bigotry and class struggle. The myth of the city as a shared space of synthesis began to unfold with the migrant crisis in the face Covid-19--who is allowed to inhabit the urban space, who is allowed access to the gentrified suburbs of elite restitution? Who builds the city? The reimagining of the urban space is unravelling in real-time. The importance of literature on the city becomes increasingly vital as we try to navigate our privilege and try to envision what the future utopias of urban worldmaking would look like. Or is the city by its very nature, by its dependence on capital, a dystopian reality? How does cinema figure in these relationships?

From its very beginning cinema has presented to, and represented the burgeoning cityscape, and their relationship has been increasingly complicated through the years. As a mode of social mobility, the city has attained its place of capitalist morality in the national consciousness. Cinema in itself was a product of and to the city, building an aesthetic sensibility for the urban gaze around the world. Within this imagination, the Manichean division of the world--the Occident and the Orient--was constantly reinforced, with the urban space assuming the place of the disparaged and uniquely divided metropole. The development of the city, with its swelling proletariat spaces divided along caste lines, and gentrified spaces inhabited by the colonizer built on an accumulation of capital through the dispossession of the colonized, become the legacy of the city. Colonization was and remains a spatial regime based in the colonist city, and while an appropriation of colonial urban politics after decolonization might have led to a restructuring of

class relations in the city, the gentrified parts were instead inhabited by the richer classes and castes of the postcolonial world reinforcing the same excesses that easily translated to the cinema. Cinema, in fact, developed and created perceptions of human history, the human body and the turmoils of class and regulated how the city is imagined and remembered. The neoliberal city, with its capitalist ethics and the chaos of the rat race, get embodied in the aesthetic imagination of the urban space. With these perspectives, cinema continues to create prototypes of the inhabitants of the city. The lost, the dispossessed while rarely getting a voice in popular cinema, become important parts of this dichotomous relationship in capitalism. For one to sustain oneself in its comforts, it requires another to live in drudgery. Recent research by scholars like D. Asher Ghertner (Ghertner, 2015) into the aesthetics of gentrification acting as the soft power of the state, illustrate how capitalism and globalization create a world-class aesthetic of the urban space, with its apolitical lack of considerations of the lives of millions on the backs of whom this imagery is created, shows us how the regulation of global capital regularly influences aesthetics, and how we view ideas like “development” and “growth” through popular cinema and media. Even modernity, which remains contested in this fairly dichotomous political reality, poses another problem in our understanding of both the city and cinema. The cinemascape of the city can thus be plotted as such, in these two zones--of comfort and dispossession--that remain removed from each other. The cleavage between the city, especially larger cities encapsulating some modicum of cultural importance, is always between those who view the city as a place of cultural consumption and those who see the city as a place of living struggle, which is a product of race, caste, class and gender.

Care, kinship, which assumes a space largely of socialization under capitalism in the fast-paced city, become areas of tension, forced enclosures and isolation. As one traverses the city, ideas of isolation are equally alienating and anxiety-inducing. Mark Fisher's (Fisher, 2009) work on capitalist realism can help us further make the connection between the social matrix of image-based stimuli as media and our psyche. The constant surveillance, which has been a subject of a lot of research, is particularly representative of the impersonal lives we lead vis-a-vis each other and the state in the city. Queer persons, persons of colour and other minorities who already live troubled lives in the ghettoized portions of the city, become victims of constant policing and tracking that makes the city not just a geographical landmass, but a politic unto itself. The city has evolved from a space of mobility, "development", liberation and new ideas to fully fulfilling their imperial and colonial legacies around the world. Class and caste relations evolve and grow more insidious in this evolving city as they interact with globalization and the space of the family becomes more and more tied to politics and socialization.

Cities have dissolved from land entities to spaces of exploitation, dispossession and disdain. Revolution, dissent and protests occupy their own spaces in the city owing to these tensions. Shaheen Bagh, which became the hub of Muslim agency and politics in New Delhi exposes what a hub of hyper-production can transform into upon being exposed to the violence of the state. In this time of social isolation when the biological requirements of capital limit mobility for some and thrust others into scavenging for the most basic of utilities, the urban space becomes more disputed. In this time, we need to rethink the idea of the urban space and what the media wants us to make of it,

with the continuous polemic targeted towards the working class and lower-caste migrants.

The strand of scholarship in this journal takes up some vital questions: what utopias can be projected into the future of the city? How does cinema continue to imagine this increasingly fraught space? How do we understand the private and public in this age of the surveilling matrix of the internet and technology? How do people create affective relationships with cities? What is modernity and how does urban cinema explore its problematic relationship with people and politics? How does the city of conflict, violence and crime prefigure in the cinema of the city? How is the memory of war constructed and remembered? How is class and caste upheld and propagated culturally through cinema? This seamless chain of enquiry flows through all the articles in this inaugural volume.

In our first essay, Anushka Maheshwary's brilliantly researched piece examines the creation of queer utopia in the 'San Junipero' episode of the popular Netflix series Black Mirror. Engaging with the ideas of Cartesian metaphysics and Jose Munoz's 'Cruising Utopia', the author attempts to rethink the construction of urban spaces in cinema and the necessity of reconstruction. Absolutely vital in the time of neoliberal naturalization of queerness as a politic and an identity, this article tries to understand the cinematic failure of imagining queer utopias in contrast with the utopianism imagines by writers like Jose Munoz, who understands such a concept as being embodied within the temporal reality of queer people--within the race, sex, politics.

She understands how the Black Mirror episodes echo the voice of all those who continually lose their hope in utopias, and place this hopelessness in Cartesian dualism and making the

ahistorical and limited assumption of some inherent division between the mind and body. To think that the “unembodied” self would survive and sustain itself without its temporal reality becomes a way in which politics is whitewashed from imaginings on queer utopia. This article is absolutely vital in ushering forth a new understanding of what it means-- and will mean--to be queer.

Continuing along this grain, Anushree Joshi's erudite article, Lost in Isolation presents a caricature of isolated human identities within a hyper-urbanized city. She presents a relationship with one's self-identity and externalized position presented in the face of capitalism, class differences and an atomized perception of the world. She understands the juxtaposition of private and public spaces, and how one navigates escapism within the larger ordeals of urbanization and capitalism. Critiquing the complex urban geography(s) of the city, and the relationship of the migrant in constant flux views the idea of Mumbai and the urbanscape through some vital sociological and anthropological texts, which seek to show Mumbai as a space for an imaginative fantasy. These fantasies, consistently reinforced through media, the regulation of global capital and the supermythos of social mobility in the city, create for a constant tension in the inhabitants of the city. Mumbai, in Anushree's article, exactly encapsulates the space of a Post-Fordist city that becomes ripe for cultural commodification. Arguing that the nature of the failed love story at the centre of Photograph, is exactly symptomatic of the relationship of capitalism, which seeks to divide the world into private spaces of consumption, does not allow the two protagonists to sustain themselves outside of their socio-political spheres. Escaping into each other's lives comes with joy, albeit temporarily. This paper

imagines a utopia, in the space between two friends, but also understands how that utopia corresponds with the caste-class realities the spectre of urban capitalism makes them victims to. Bhumika Singh's article is an enlightening Foucauldian study of urban spatial settings in two films spanning time and space, *Trapped* (2017) and *Rear Window* (1954), where she analyses the changes, developments, and deterioration in the human psyche in two categories of urban enclosures. She places her analysis in an understanding of the place of community and communal harmony in the making of the individual psyche and social well being, themes that will broaden our understanding not only social consciousness but also criminality. She imagines the Panopticon as having freed itself from its dense corporeality as conceived by early theorists like Foucault and Bentham and having been transformed to mass surveillance methods of human tracking systems and data trawling. Viewing *Trapped* (2017) as a metaphor for this hyper-modernised mode of surveillance, she reinforces a very modern and urban paranoia of being watched while completely isolated. Drawing a comparison with *Rear Window* (1954), the panopticon assumes the position of the voyeuristic protagonist itself. While the author of the article understands this position of the protagonist, bound in his hampered physicality and casually viewing the lives of others in a vocabulary of privacy as a human right that he is infringing, but one can also understand the relationship of capitalism and the urban space, and how the impersonal lack of care and kinship in the people of the city, systematically alienated by capitalist concerns of the individual leads to an ease in the propagation of mass surveillance. She further understands the dialectics in which power and agency interact with the final liberation of the enclosure. A seething study on the interstices of urbanity, private

spaces and the gaze, this article will inflate one's understanding of what it means to inhabit the urban space.

Saman Waheed's paper seeks to demonstrate the adventure of living the same reality but on a vastly different yet subtly similar plane of perspective - a looking glass of relationships in the city of Mumbai between four people. People go through life making attachments with both spaces and people and assimilate them in their personalities thus leading to "mirroring connections", a theme she has handled to perfection. She understands the protagonists of Dhobi Ghat through their affective relationships with the cultural commodities of the city and how their relationship with each other is laced with the isolating baggage of the urban space. She understands that along with space, a city can also become a character within the poetic-cinematic imagination of the film. Viewing the lived experience and phenomenology of the male and female characters of the film, the paper attempts to understand how gendered experiences of a city tend to be uniform. The film casts a gendered gaze upon the urban reality of the city.

Sanyal's The Bollywood Reel: Delhi in Moving Images explores urban spaces of Delhi. Analysing the changing nature in terms of the identity of the city and that of the people that inhabit it, as reflected in film. Highlighting films like Rang De Basanti, Monsoon Wedding, and No One Killed Jessica, and how they portray the youth, political realms, weddings, and the society of Delhi while enveloping an understanding of modernity, crime and its aesthetic understanding in cinema. Understanding the wedding in cinema through films like Monsoon Wedding, as a cynosure of class and caste endogamy, and the tensions of the bourgeois family as it comes across with diverse ideas and ideologies in the globalized Delhi, and representing political

allegories of youth, politics and idealism. She also understands the way media can help shape our ideas of dissent and popular protest by foregrounding the city as a contested space between varying individuals. A vital essay in broadening our understanding of the city as a space of tension and conflict in otherwise idyllic institutions like the family.

In our final essay, grounding his research in the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, Priyantha Fonseka has brilliantly structured a piece on silence as a mode of academic inquiry into cinema. Looking at the cityscape as a space for people in transit--refugees of natural and man-made disasters, the scholar understands the changes engendering the city within this expression of the nation's aesthetics. It presents us with an important synthesis into studies of urbanism and cinema.

We close this volume with a review of Travels of Bollywood Cinema: From Bombay to LA by Anjali Gera Roy and Chua Beng Huat which explores the concept of national identity and its relationship with national cinema. The review examines how regional cinema and diasporic interventions expose and disrupt the project of creating a homogeneous national identity.

And finally, we have an interview with filmmaker Bhaskar Hazarika whose films Aamis (The Ravening) and Kothanodi examine Assamese identity and urban anonymity in the northeastern cityscape.

The epistemological value of these essays lies in the harmonious selection of methodological base, with navigating the value of queer utopia and its imagination(s) in contemporary media, investigating the city as a site for isolation and class diffusion and repression; expanding definitions and usages of the Foucauldian panopticon and applying them to the urban industrial idiom, the phenomenology of inhabiting contested

spaces and traversing caste and class through the conflicts of the city and social units inhabiting it. The volume unpacks some increasingly important conjuncctions between the evolution and representation of the city and the socio-cultural machinery of capital that surrounds it, which would be helpful in augmenting one's understanding of the same.

In our limited capacity, we have tried our best to delineate academia from the larger power structures that shape and empower it. While there is no democratization and decolonization without a change in material conditions, this has been our attempt to create academic literature that is accessible and free. We hope that these essays by our young scholars lend to your erudition and further inquiry into urban spaces and cinema. We are overwhelmed by presenting this to you!

*Signing off,*  
*Oli Chatterjee, Editor-in-Chief*  
*Giitanjali, Editor-in-Chief*  
*Khushi Jain, Journal design and Illustration*  
*Prasannata Ekka, Illustrator*  
*Aditi Joshi, Editor*  
*Sonal Sharma, Editor*  
*Suhasini Das Gooptu, Editor*  
*Surmayi Khatana, Editor*

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Anushka Maheshwary

# Cruising San Junipero

Tracing the Impossibility and  
Possibilities of a Queer Utopia

In classic Black Mirror fashion, episode four of season three entitled San Junipero urges one to think about the entrapments of technological advancements and the ways in which they come to define and interact with notions of humanity and society, thus presenting, as one has observed in some of its previous episodes, a futuristic conception of the use of modern inventions that in turn give rise to questions about the nature of the utopian space that the narrative posits. However, the concept explored by the writers of this particular episode stands out from the rest of the series and is thus also the grounding for the discussion that will ensue in this paper, insofar as its imagining of queer utopian spaces is concerned specifically in light of its sympathies to Cartesian dualism[1] as opposed to a more embodied cognition.

### **San Junipero: the place and the narrative style**

This concept of a virtual world where one can escape the limitations of one's physical existence, of digitizing one's mind to do away with bodily needs and worries, is also a traditionally popular trope within the cinematic world of Scientific Fiction[1]. In 2001: A Space Odyssey, Stanley Kubrick narrates to the viewers a course of events set into motion by an alien race that assisted humanity in the early stages of its development through a mysterious machine, the Monolith, and helped humanity reach out for the stars. In the original novel, of which Kubrick's work is an adaptation, written by Arthur C. Clarke, those alien species are claimed to be the first community to explore and realize the possibilities of interstellar travel and the technology that enables them to transfer their minds into a digital environment. The story thus sees them overcome the limitations inbuilt in their physical, empirical existence and become "omnipotent", working within the subtext that implies that this is the ultimate

achievement for each and every species that exists within the cosmos. Following a similar trend, in Wally Pfister's and Jack Paglen's "Transcendence" one moves through the story of Dr. Will Caster, a widely renowned researcher in the field of artificial intelligence, and the realization of the aims of technological singularity, as his wife, Dr. Evelyn Caster, transfers his mind onto a supercomputer to have him transcend the limitations of his empirical existence that his dying body exposes. What ensues as the narrative builds is Will using his newly acquired and enhanced cerebral capabilities in order to achieve a whole host of scientific breakthroughs and even the creation of a human hive mind. Again, a thorough analysis of this particular narrative and this trope at large reveal the underlying subtext, i.e., of the idea of unlocking the full potential of humanity to be centrally grounded in the idea of the riddance of bodily existence as such and exposing the limitations of one's current state through showcasing the possibility of eternal existence by means of the digital "uploading" of one's mind in a virtual environment.

One can characterize the narrative of the *San Junipero* by delineating two parts in the plot as a whole: the first part spent truly without an idea about the groundlessness of this place called San Junipero in the empirical world one moves through and the other spent observing the course of events with the awareness that *San Junipero* is a virtual environment into which stored consciousnesses are digitally uploaded. If one were to briefly explain how the story unfolds in the former, then it can be done as follows: it is 1987, and a woman named Yorkie visits the nightclub Tucker's in *San Junipero* where she first meets another woman Kelly, one who seems to know her way around the town, and what follows are a couple more sexual encounters between the two. However, the following week Yorkie visits another nightclub, the Quagmire, looking for Kelly where

she is advised to "try a different time" and her search for Kelly ultimately does culminate in 2002, only to have her attempts at communication rebuffed by Kelly. It is in the series of interactions, that follows the preceding moment, between these two where Kelly confesses that it was the fear of her impending death that kept her from reaching out to Yorkie that leads the latter to reluctantly reveal to the former her real-life location so that they can meet.

As these heartfelt confessions between the two women take place, the nature of this idyllic place called San Junipero becomes clearer to the viewers and what follows hereon is comprehended with the underlying understanding of this realization. San Junipero revealed to be a simulated reality, where the dead can live on and the elderly can visit every so often, all the while inhabiting their younger selves' bodies. The narrative continues in the physical world with the elderly Kelly visiting Yorkie, where she learns from Yorkie's nurse that she was paralyzed at age 21 because of a car crash after her parents reacted poorly to her coming out. Yorkie wishes to be euthanized so that she can live, or what in the episode is referred to as "passing over", in San Junipero permanently, and it is Kelly who authorizes Yorkie's euthanasia.

During Kelly's next visit to San Junipero, Yorkie proposes that she "pass over" too and become a permanent resident of the city after which an argument ensues between the two exposing the ways in which the idea of a consciousness that isn't embodied might be unsettling and counterintuitive to individuals within communities. Ironically, it is simultaneously demonstrated yet again that existence is eternal in San Junipero, and the idea of meaningfully affecting one's environment's materiality is not a possibility as Kelly emerges unscathed from her car which she crashes on purpose during the argument. However, the writers leave viewers with a conclusion that is very unlike even the dark theme of the preceding episode "Shut up and dance,"

as Kelly returns having made the decision to “pass over” and reunites with Yorkie inside San Junipero. In subverting a common trope in television of killing off lesbian characters: yes, Kelly and Yorkie die but as their consciousnesses live on so do their virtual selves in a virtual world, and working with a narrative that illustrates that queer characters do not have to be tragic, this episode also uniquely stands apart from others in the series and science fictions cinema centered around this trope at large on account of how the development of the narrative constitutes thenature of the place, i.e., San Junipero and the possibilities that such a characterization allows for not just human thought and behavior at large but also for queer lives to thrive and extend their horizons beyond the ones set by the gendered world they’ve left behind.

San Junipero is a peculiar virtual environment, a simulation, where stored consciousnesses of those persons who’ve decided to “pass over” permanently reside with some of the living individuals also visiting and interacting with one another in a space that can be deemed to exist beyond constraints that bind the empirical world. On the surface, it appears as if San Junipero is still bound by spatiotemporal limits- what with the narrative consistently employing popular symbols to invoke the nostalgia of passing eras, however, these remain superficial insofar as the influence that the categories of space and time in such a setting aren’t truly meaningful in the ways in which they are for the empirical world. For instance, in a moment of utter frustration that culminates in Kelly punching the mirror, however contrary to the expectations of the viewers neither is Kelly hurt nor is the surface of the mirror shattered- consequences that would follow in the empirical world, thus creating sufficient conditions for one to act without the worry of the consequences of one’s actions to ever materialize meaningfully.

Therefore one finds the utopia that this narrative sets up, where various consciousness exist without a significant sense of materiality, such that they can be classified as existing beyond it and interact with one another, is a truly unique location to address why the possibility of discovering queer utopias in the cinematic representations of spaces like this remains bleak.



## **Reflections of Cartesian metaphysics in San Junipero and Embodied Cognition**

Possible answers to the aforementioned question lie in understanding how the utopia posited in *San Junipero* is grounded in cartesian metaphysics which stands in direct opposition to embodied cognition that might instead lie at the heart of a reenvisioning of our collective sociopolitical realities into a queer utopia. According to the philosophical thesis of embodied cognition, an agent's cognition is strongly influenced by aspects of their bodily existence in conjunction with and not merely a neurophysical function of the brain itself.

Some of the literature in this field of study of the philosophy of mind explains the dependence of cognition upon the body and its environmental interactions by asserting that cognition, as it is witnessed in biological systems, is not an end in itself but is limited by the system's purposes and potential, by what it allows. Within the broad purview of existentialist tradition itself, certain thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and some others have proposed a whole host of philosophical treatises that have influenced the development of what can be referred to as the 'embodiment' thesis. Ponty's work fascinates one, in particular, on account of its relevance to the context of *San Junipero*, specifically his claim that one's body is a necessary condition for the possibility of phenomenal experiences, constituting what in phenomenological terms would be described as one's perceptual openness to the world, thus demonstrating a corporeality of consciousness as well as an intentionality of the body.

A wider view of the "embodiment" thesis than that of Varela *et al.*, one that includes characteristics of situated cognition as well would be as follows:

*"Various features of cognition are embodied insofar as they are deeply dependent upon characteristics of the physical body of an*

*agent, such that the agent's body plays a significant causal role, or even a physically constitutive role, in that agent's cognition itself. However, it isn't merely the agent's physical existence that shapes their cognition but also their social and cultural environment at large."*

In philosophy of mind, the idea that cognition is embodied is often seen as sympathetic to and consistent with other views of cognition such as situated cognition that asserts that the act of knowing and therefore knowledge itself is bound to one's social, cultural and broadly speaking physical contexts, in turn indicating a move towards an absolute re-localization of mental processes out of the neurophysical domain.

As opposed to this view endorsed by the theorists of embodied cognition, the episode expresses Cartesian tendencies of perceiving humanity as consisting of two sets of parallel histories and existences- that of the body and the mind, both in its characterization of the San Junipero and even allowing for the existence of a virtual environment like that of San Junipero. The narrative is reflective of cartesian metaphysics insofar as it maintains, as the central tenet of virtual reality like San Junipero, that consciousness or the mind is capable of existing independently of the body thus making the dream of transcending physical limitations a realizable goal for the characters that inhabit the world of that episode.

It is in locating this similarity between the world as it is envisioned in San Junipero and Descartes' metaphysical beliefs that one realizes the opposition to such a view and its contrast with the position that theorists of the "embodied" cognition thesis occupy. However, the conception of both consciousness and cognition that one apprehends in this particular episode are unique inasmuch as in a sense the consciousnesses that interact in that world are embodied, given that the project of conceiving

of a pure and absolute consciousness remains far from the project of conceiving of a pure and absolute consciousness remains far from realized for various reasons. In the interactions that one witness amongst those who inhabit San Junipero as well as between individuals and their environment, it remains obviously evident that they aren't absolutely incorporeal yet one's existence in this world is such that allows one the opportunity to transcend the very limitations built it into corporeality. Therefore, the very terms on which the "embodied" self exists and interacts with this world and its other inhabitants' changes, this simulated existence of the "uploaded" consciousness is unable to affect these relations meaningfully, specifically affect them materially, and so one witnesses a shedding of the histories of queer bodies on which their existence is premised such that they turn into "ghosts in machines" as a consequence of the famous charge of the categorical mistake leveled against Descartes.

The cinematic expressions of queer utopia, as one has attempted to argue, will remain at a distance from queer utopias as they are imagined in the works of queer theorists such as the likes of Jose Muñoz as long as they are fashioned after a Cartesian metaphysics that hierarchizes the mind over the body and therefore also the history and existence of the former over the latter. However, as one has seen in the conception of such a space by Muñoz himself, it exists not in such spaces as San Junipero that lie in the possibilities that the distant future holds but as an exercise in the affective and cognitive mapping of the world such that these maps, built on the idea of a queer utopianism, necessitate a politicized cruising of them- necessitated by the urge to, "reconsider, ideas such as hope and utopia but also challenges them to feel hope and to feel utopia." [2]

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From the director of  
**LUNCHBOX**

Written and Directed by  
**RITESH BATRA**

CHALCHITRA DARPARN  
URBAN SPACES 2019-2020

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Evaluating Escapism in Ritesh Batra's *Photograph*

# Lost in Isolation

## Introduction

With a world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in 2019, *Photograph* is an Indian romantic-drama, written and directed by Ritesh Batra. Starring Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Sanya Malhotra[1] as the protagonists, the movie is set in the city of Mumbai, and is Batra's second stint in Bollywood, following his critically acclaimed work in *The Lunchbox* [2].

The scope of this paper is to study the escape motif in *Photograph* and its association with the city of Mumbai. The cityscape bears significant impact upon the creation, manifestation, isolation, and eventual exploration for a self-identity. The human connection that is the subject of the individual's quest in Batra's film, in the public sphere, influences this exploration of identity in the private sphere. The paper then analyses the tensions in the private/public spheres, and how the immediate necessity for escape for the characters is constantly undercut with the lingering sense of transience of the aforementioned escape within the urbanity of Mumbai.

## Mumbai, Social Structure, and Identities

Indian cinema, and Bollywood in particular, has romanticised the idea of cities, towns, and lands, sometimes relegating a character-like aura to these geographical places [3]. In the 21st century, the urban cityscape has emerged as a modern muse for writers and filmmakers. Mumbai, especially with its proximity to the world of Hindi cinema, has been the subject of many such works, and has been labelled the city of dreams [4]. This position as the artistic muse has been shaped by more than simple sentimentality, and the works featuring the city as a prominent subject reflect the significant influence of its evolution in terms of sociology, economics, politics, and culture. Andrew Harris, in his essay titled “The Metonymic Urbanism of

Twenty-first-century Mumbai”, has stated the following, with respect to the evolution of the city: What has also been significant is a marked increase and acceleration in flows of people, ideas, goods, images, and symbols between Mumbai and the West over the past 20 years. Mumbai has been a key node in shaping what the Bombay-born anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996) refers to as overlapping and disjunctive global ‘scapes’. These ethnoscapes, mediascapes and ideoescapes - shaped by technological advances, the English language and greater international travel - have meant that representations, dreams, experiences, and fantasies of Mumbai have been brought closer to audiences and markets overseas. (2957 Harris)

Director Ritesh Batra has been associated with the representation of the evolving and new Mumbai, as described above by Harris. In an interview with *The Telegraph*, Batra stated, “I grew up here (in Mumbai), and left when I was 18 – that was in 1998. And then I came back to make *Lunchbox*, and I’ve been coming back since then every year. . . . I live in New York now, but for me, like all people who leave India, I look back with a certain nostalgia.” (Upadhyay). The characters in *Photograph* too function with the same refrain - the urbanity of the Mumbai stems from a longing, or a vague awareness that the present inside and outside of them is unsatisfactory.

This picture of urbanity has been painted in the film through these key factors, which bear causality on the private/public identity crisis within the characters and create the need for an escape: expectations based on social structure, internal isolation of self, caused by extensive crowding in the urban space, and an acute absence of physical/emotional calmness that is based upon the previous two factors.

The social structure expresses itself in subtle ways throughout the film. This subtlety is a real manifestation of how socio-

economic divisions are not explicitly stark in urban spaces like Mumbai, owing to the modern world adapting more polite ways of sustaining systems of domination, instead of using direct instruments of violence, as may be the case in earlier times and within non-urban spaces. For instance, a cab-driver is reluctant to believe that the fair-skinned, and by extension upper-class by appearance, Miloni and the dark-skinned, and thus a man from a lower class strata or perhaps even a caste lower to Miloni's within the caste gradation, Rafi could be engaged in a romantic relationship (1:05:17-1:05:22). In another instance subtly highlighting the class divisions of this unlikely romance, Miloni instantly falls sick upon eating a gola (ice-candy) from a street vendor and is chastised by her father and physician, who are of the belief that items bought and sold on the street are unsuitable for consumption to an upper-class, sophisticated woman like Miloni (1:00:14-1:01:17). The frame contrasting this sense of elitism has Rafi's grandmother aka Daadi [5], commenting upon how Noorie's aversion to the candy showcases her rather delicate nature and sheltered upbringing (1:01:28-1:02:04). Batra may be using these contrasting frames to highlight the physical illness, indigestion, as a symbol of how unnatural this class transcendence in romance is, within the urban space of Mumbai.

This expression of class divisions in the city of Mumbai leads to an ironic isolation of the individual in the growing congestion and sprawl of the city. *Photograph* dwells upon this individual sense of isolation, as is Batra's style, by showing the need for human connections. Anupama Chopra, a popular critic of Indian cinema, summarised this theme in Batra's work by quoting E.M. Forster's famous refrain - "Only connect" [6] (Chopra 2:20-2:25). The monotony of life in Mumbai, crowded, is established from the first frame itself which showcases the notorious traffic of

the city, with vehicles honking at one another, as contrasted with the following frame in which Rafi walks over a bridge, by himself (0:00:50-0:00:58). Miloni and Rafi are both isolated within their own circumstances, owing to their differing positions in the socio-economic divisions of urban India. While Miloni's life as a modern woman from an educated, upper-class family in present-day Mumbai directs her to a life where forming a stable family, and aspiring financial success in her career, are prominent objectives, Rafi's upbringing in a financially unstable household without a father figure subjects him to the patriarchal role of the bread-earner, where his own dreams and desires become secondary to fulfilling family debts, sending a significant portion of his salary to his family in the village, worrying about the financial prospects of his sisters' weddings, and ultimately fading into the image of a man sacrificing for and sustaining the family dependent upon him. The familial and social expectations from Miloni are highlighted by Batra in the frame where a billboard, revealing her meritorious performance in the examinations of chartered accountancy, is hung for the city to see (00:23:31). Rafi's sacrifice within the urban patriarchal setting are brought to light when he reveals to Miloni that the former enjoys a kulfi at the end of every month, like his father, to perhaps reward himself for being able to sufficiently provide for his family (00:57:08-00:57:13). His circumstances are also a reflection of the migrant's condition in the consistently growing cityscape of Mumbai, which perhaps promises more than it can deliver to the common man.

These social expectations and the divisions of class combine to isolate the two in their own separate ways. Rafi can be seen as emotionally alone in a crowded accommodation, which can be seen as a metonym for the general urbanisation and increasing

population in the city of Mumbai. His monologue about marriage reveals that his socio-economic circumstances impact his decision to not get married, despite severe perseverance from Daadi and others - he states that the wife and children will have to live in the village, and the distance will only make him long for a family (00:08:20-00:08:24). His steadfastness to not marry until the debt their family owes in the village also serves to emphasise the individual isolation the public sphere has created (00:18:15-00:18:22).

Miloni becomes isolated, despite having the class and circumstantial privilege, when ironically being on display on a billboard, her sense of identity fades into the background. Anupama Chopra argues that Batra never really allows us to “see” Miloni (Chopra 2:29). This quality of Photograph seemingly reflects the tone of Miloni’s characterisation and negotiation of her own identity. The first time Miloni is seen in the film, the audience is shown her inability to decide the colour of her preference while shopping with her mother and her position as a wallflower within the frame is established (00:02:19-00:03:05). This drives her characterisation, as argued above by Chopra, where she has been in a rigid gendered and socio-economic hierarchy within which her desires and decisions about her individualised identity are considerably unimportant to her family, and the society by extension. It would be a speculative assumption to state that Miloni lacks agency and is oppressed, but the crux of her character’s essence lies in that she has been confined to a rigid social structure for her entire life and now she perceives her own desires insignificant to a point that perhaps they appear non-existent to her.

However, the conflict of her character and the film belongs in the attempt to transcend beyond the social divisions set within the urban space, to enter outside of the individual’s sense of

isolation. The New York Times commented on the treatment of class - "...Batra shades in the leads and their worlds with a human specificity that makes "Photograph" compelling in a slice-of-life way, particularly regarding class in India." (Harris, Aisha). An integral instance of this entwined association of class transcendence and urban isolation is the relationship shared between Miloni and the house-maid, Rampyaari. Nobody, apart from Miloni, is shown to have a humane, personal interest in the life of the maid (00:41:28-00:43:29). It is Rampyaari who bears witness to Rafi's and Miloni's charade in the public space, not frequented by other members of Miloni's family (1:08:18). The hierarchy of class divisions in the urban space is, thus, associated again with the lack of human connection - "Miloni shares a close bond with her family's live-in housekeeper, and their conversations before bedtime succinctly reveal another way in which hierarchy casually plays out in the everyday." (Harris, Aisha).

Therefore, these factors within the urbanity of the city of Mumbai create an escape motif in *Photograph*, as the characters attempt to negotiate with the private/public formation of their respective identities.

## **Escapism**

The relationship between Miloni and Rafi, in itself, is an exercise in escaping the socially induced respective individual isolations of identity. As elaborated upon in the previous part of this paper, both of them are not entirely happy with their circumstances and Batra's work on the film, following the concept of an unlikely romance in *The Lunchbox*, takes place in this crevice where the characters acknowledge their own isolated selves and attempt to explore alternate possibilities for themselves.

The premise of their relationship begins with this exploration of an alternate version of identity, when Rafi says to Miloni, as he does to rope in new customers - “सालों बाद जब आप ये फ़ोटो देखेंगी तो आपको आपके चेहरे पे यही धुप दिखाई देगी... आज का दिन फ़ोटो में” (“Years later, when you look at this photo, you will see the same sunlight... Today, in a photo”; my trans.; 00:05:10-00:05:38). The titular photograph stands symbolic of holding back time in one place, to look back on it years later and see a different version of oneself. The literal lens of the camera, through which Rafi sees Miloni, becomes the metaphorical lens of possibility to Miloni, as she states to Daadi, “फिर जब मैंने वो फ़ोटो देखी, मुझे लगा कोई और है... वो मुझसे ज़्यादा खुश लग रही थी”. Upon saying this, she instantly bursts into a smile (“When I saw that photo, I thought I was looking at someone else... She looked happier than me”; my trans.; 00:51:18-00:51:35). It is an important irony, to be explored in the later sections of the paper, that the truly riveting and real discoveries of joy about one’s identity happen during the charade Miloni (aka Noorie) and Rafi enact for his grandmother. The name, Noorie, which is attributed to Miloni in a scene set in the tone of nostalgia is another way Photograph instantiates the escape motif. In an attempt to pacify his worrisome grandmother, Rafi writes a letter lying about the fact he has found a girl for himself, and as the twists of fate or the writing of the script would have it - he encloses the photograph he had clicked of Miloni at the Gateway along with the letter. The visuals are dark and reminiscent in sentiment as an old tune plays at some radio nearby, and he derives the inspiration of his imaginary beloved’s name from the song - “Noorie” from the 1979 film of the same name (00:15:10-00:15:35). The choice of this name is in tandem with both - an alternate identity exploration for Miloni and the tone of looking fondly back at the past.

In terms of the exploration of identity and an escape from her

*present confinements, the name acts as the foundational symbol for the entire endeavour that follows. The metanarrative technique of storytelling is an integral part of Photograph*, and the desire to be an actress, which was dismissed in the real world inhabited by Miloni at a family dinner-table conversation, manifests into reality in the imaginary world through this technique (0:13:01-0:13:24). *The New York Times* stated, with regard to this metanarrative technique, “When she agrees to pose as Rafi’s love interest for his dadi (Farrukh Jaffar), who is eager to visit Mumbai to meet Miloni, it’s a welcome break from the monotony of her own life.” (Harris, Aisha).

The conversations and non-verbal exchanges between Noorie and Rafi during the course of their charade for Daadi reveal more about Miloni than anything in her non-imaginary, supposedly real world does. In her social and familial space, she is the quiet kind who hears her parents discuss and plan her life while she listens from the backdrop, but in her relationship with Rafi and Daadi, she is a master storyteller who takes charge of continuing the act. As discussed earlier, her transcendence of the class hierarchy through her conversations with Rampyaari in the urban space takes place in the process of escape and exploration involving the charade. Living in the alternate possibility of her identity becomes almost empowering for her in the scene where she tells a prospective boy, whom her parents desire for her to marry, that her ideal life would be set in a village (1:12:12-1:14:52). Chintan, the boy in question, is a product of the urban Mumbaidream promised to all, but fulfilled for a seldom few, as can be seen in Rafi’s contrasting circumstances. He dreams of living outside the country, and aspires his way to success on the corporate ladder - a path on which Miloni apparently is set upon too, with her chartered accountancy aspirations. The act of not only rejecting Chintan,

but also revealing to him a desire that would be preposterous to her social class, is an act symbolic of rejecting the ideals, and the social identity which binds her to those ideals. Nell Minow articulated this transformation from Miloni to Noorie by writing:

As herself, she is so introverted and unsure that she cannot even tell Rafi or her mother what color she likes. But pretending to be the girl he wrote about, she can come up with a dramatic backstory for the character she is playing. And seeing herself differently, in the photograph and in the persona she creates for Rafi's grandmother, inspires her to think about other lives and envision a different one for herself. She asks her family's maid about life on a farm. She can tell Rafi about missing the cola she used to share with her grandfather. (Minow)

The escape motif, in *Photograph*, frequently juxtaposes the exploration of an identity for the future with a nostalgia for the past. In an interview with *The Telegraph*, Ritesh Batra discussed the prominent tone of nostalgia, by stating:

The city I knew is all gone, but it's all there in my head and it's what I know. These characters have a lot of nostalgia, for another time — it's the point of view I write them from. That is Bombay for me, I really love and miss that Bombay and what it used to be. And while I like this new one too, it's different and I don't know it as well. (Upadhyay)

This nostalgia for the past, for the lost Bombay that has now changed to the urban, crowded, and a new Mumbai – it becomes another instance of the need to escape from the present reality inhabited by the characters.

As stated earlier, the titular photograph is symbolic of this sentimental necessity to hold on to the romanticism of the past. The other important object that serves this purpose is Miloni's favourite and fondly remembered beverage, Campa Cola [7].

While it rains outside, Miloni and Rafi sit in a small tea-stall where Rafi notes that the former does not drink cola (a beverage), and Miloni says, “कैम्पा कोला याद है?” (“Remember Campa Cola?”). The idea of escaping into the past is reiterated through this line, following which she shares that her grandfather used to buy her Campa Cola every day, and their ritual ceased upon his death. When the beverage was removed from production, she stopped drinking cola altogether (52:22-54:04).

The rampant growth of consumerism in a capitalistic urban setting is seen through the lens of the individual in this scene. As Bombay turned to Mumbai and the principles of supply and demand took precedence in an increasingly materialistic development-oriented world, the human value of objects ceased to matter. Thus, Miloni's reminiscing of Campa Cola stems from the same place of discontent in her identity that makes her participate in the charade with Rafi, and that which empowers her to reject Chintan. Batra takes this echo of nostalgia further, in the imaginary world he has painted, by showing Rafi invested in arranging a bottle of Campa for Miloni. His quest for it takes him to a factory owned by a husband who preserved the recipe for his wife, as she too, like Miloni, had adored the drink. The metanarrative technique of Batra's storytelling emerges again with this scene, as it shows the universal need - with the context of a deeply individualistic, personal memory - to reconnect with the past. What Rafi is doing for Miloni is what the factory-owner did for his wife, and someday someone else will replicate for another person. This peculiar connectivity emphasises how Miloni's and Rafi's supposed romance, as a means of escape, is not an oddity, but a pattern based on the desire for human connection in an ever-evolving urbanising world.

The symbol of the movies, and the employment of the metanarrative technique through it, is another way the aforementioned pattern of escaping the present and turning to the past with nostalgia is explored in *Photograph*. In his interview with *The Telegraph*, Batra confessed his inspiration from the popular stories of love in Hindi cinema. He said:

The poor guy was always a motor mechanic and the rich girls always had bad attitude. I thought to myself, what if there was a way to make a movie like that, but if it was really true and we'd believe every second of it that these two people would spend time together? In real life, these two kinds of people never really spend any time together, let alone the whole length of a movie. (Upadhyay)

Echoing similar sentiments about the nostalgia of the film and its inspiration, in its Sundance Premiere review, Chief Film Critic, Fionnuala Halligan wrote, "...a throwback to the old-fashioned big screen romances of yore." (Halligan). The boy-meets-girl premise of their first meeting with a twist of fate, the social divisions (class, caste, religion) that screamed obstruction for the great romance in old Bollywood movies that have been sublimated to suit the sophisticated version of socio-economic hierarchy of urban Mumbai, the secrecy of the supposed romance from the girl's family - these are some of the tropes that draw a parallel between the nostalgia for the past in *Photograph* and old Hindi movies. As discussed earlier, the name given to Miloni, Noorie, is also a part of the nostalgia for, perhaps, a simpler time that the characters look back on. Extrapolating the comparison, the choice of the song for Miloni's alias can also be seen as an illuminating glorification of the past, since the word 'noor' is the English equivalent for glow, that of a more intrinsic kind.

## Temporality of the Escape

However, it is in this parallel with old Hindi cinema that Photograph's, and the characters', inevitable sense of helplessness seems to reside. Rafi says in the ending of the movie, open-ended and inconclusive (full of possibilities for some, or frustration for others) in true Batra fashion similar to *The Lunchbox*, that all movies have the same story in which the boy and girl fall in love, but ultimately don't get married because the girl's family prohibits it (1:42:28-1:43:18). These words follow a scene in a rather inexpensive theatre, less sophisticated for Miloni's habitual lifestyle, where a mouse scares and, maybe, disgusts her. Following this, she runs out of the theatre and Rafi follows her (1:40:51-1:42:01). What the ending means is open to interpretation, but it can be seen as the temporary nature of this escape into what Rafi and Miloni have perceived as romance. There may not be warring families and angry patriarchs violently prohibiting a love that transcends social divisions, but to escape into the village is a part of an imaginary fantasy that Miloni's social conditioning may never allow her to fulfill. The ending, thus, poses the questions that have underlined the escape motif in Photograph throughout: how real is the escape, and is there a possibility for it to last? The very circumstances, in which the relationship between Miloni and Rafi develops, makes the possibility of their romance being a practical form of escape from the reality of their worlds, seem implausible. There is a desire in Miloni to transcend the social barriers that confine her individual identity, as discussed earlier, but to accept her participation in a charade with a stranger in a city of nearly 18 million people is not likely or straight-forwardly possible.

Anupama Chopra summarised this nature of the premise of the charade, by stating the following - "To savor the gossamer



emotions of Photograph, you first have to buy into the scenario that a girl like Miloni would agree to participate in Rafi's charade. It is hard to believe but if you can suspend disbelief, you will be rewarded." (Chopra 1:38-1:48).

The suspension of disbelief makes the juxtaposition of the two worlds inhabited by the characters - one with its social divisions and expectations, and the other as an escape by seeking a form of transcendence - all the more tense and conflicting. *Photograph* showcases the moments of great, courageous exploration and escape, but underscores them with a liminal quality that makes belief in their practicality difficult to muster. This type of storytelling in which plot-points and intrinsic transformations in the characters take place behind the scenes makes *Photograph* memorable in its subtlety, but it is also evidence of how improbable it would be to portray the reasoning behind the transformations, when the characters are confronted with the challenges and conditioning based on their respective, real socio-economic spaces.

This subtlety and liminal quality also makes their supposed romance a temporary form of escape. *The Guardian's* review of the film focused on this underscoring quality:

Batra has his male character go on a gallant quest to seek out a defunct brand of cola somewhere in the city to give to his loved one because she adored drinking it as a child. Yet we never see him give it to her, never see her drinking it, never see her eyes lighting up at the memory or lighting up at the thought of what this man has done – nothing like that. (Bradshaw)

By hiding these moments behind the scenes - which would otherwise make Miloni's and Rafi's relationship into a story of love that the audience roots to culminate into some semblance of happiness and togetherness - Batra complicates the possibility of labelling their relationship a quintessential romance. There is an awkwardness in the chemistry between Miloni and Rafi, as illustrated in a scene at the beach where the two of them find it difficult to pose for a photograph and Rafi's grandmother teasingly encourages Rafi to put his arm around

Miloni (aka Noorie) (1:07:19-1:07:33). There are no confessions of love, but an increasing sense of longing as the movie reaches its climax, where Rafi dismisses the possibility of a happy ending for lovers in films, much before there can be any possibility of love. Class barriers in the urban setting separate Rafi and Miloni, and that is a fact they can try to overlook but ultimately end up having to confront when Miloni runs out of the theatre. There is a definite necessity and possibility of exploration for something beyond the present of one's social identity in urban Mumbai when it comes to Miloni, as is clear from her gradual character development and sense of empowerment, but her final destination upon escape may not be as far extreme as the village she fantasies about. Anupama Chopra articulately summarised this complicated layering of the relationship shared by Miloni and Rafi:

Photograph is a meditative movie on a relationship that I hesitate to call love. It took me back to Gulzar Saab's beautiful lyrics in a song in the 1970 film Khamoshi: 'हमने देखी है इन आँखों की महकती खुशबू / हाथ से छूके इसे रिश्तों का इलज़ाम ना दो / सिर्फ एहसास है ये रूह से महसूस करो / प्यार को प्यार ही रहने दो कोई नाम ना दो' ('I've seen the fragrant scent of your eyes / Don't accuse it of being a relationship by touching it / It's only a feeling to be experienced with your soul / Let love be love without giving it a name'; my trans.; Chopra 0:01-0:30)

Another integral device used by Batra, which showcases the temporary nature of escape, is the absent-present character of Tiwari [8], who remains haunted and haunting long after his suicide. What Tiwari's ghost represents in Photograph can be debatable, but Rafi's friend, Zakir voices the restlessness that characterises a presence like Tiwari, by stating, " लटक के भी चैन नहीं मिलता मुंबई में" ("No one gets peace in Mumbai, not even in death"; my trans.; 1:03:01). Tiwari's suicide by hanging from a

ceiling fan never leaves the space of the film, where the creaking noises of the fan are present in multiple moments and the camera too pans shots from the point of view of the inanimate object. This presence is an unsettling question on escape and class - as a migrant worker unhappy with his circumstances, how much choice and possibility of escape did Tiwari even have? Rafi too shares Tiwari's socio-economic circumstances, and when the ghost materialises in Shakespearean fashion that probes Rafi's psychological state, their conversation reveals that one of the factors that led to Tiwari's suicide related to a girl (1:30:45-1:32:00). Batra never explicitly showcases that this supernatural element, perhaps stemming from Rafi's imagination, is an accurate representation of Tiwari. However, the fact that a girl, probably an unfulfilled love, led to the unbearable feeling of loneliness and despair in Tiwari, is a foreshadowing of Rafi's own story with Miloni. Both, Tiwari and Rafi, may be seeking contentment in the escape of a supposed romance, but the culmination of this search is the same individual isolation within the urbanity, which led to the necessity of escape in the first place. This cycle, at least for Rafi, is associated with his socio-economic class and that is an unsettling conclusion that Batra appears to make through Tiwari's ghost - means of escape and freedom for exploration of happiness for the individual can never be truly devoid of the social divisions that shape the urban space of Mumbai, and maybe all of the urban world.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said that *Photograph* is a failed story of love that does not allow its audience to immerse its conscience in the lives and development of its characters, due its overtly liminal quality, as has been argued by *The Guardian*, in stating,

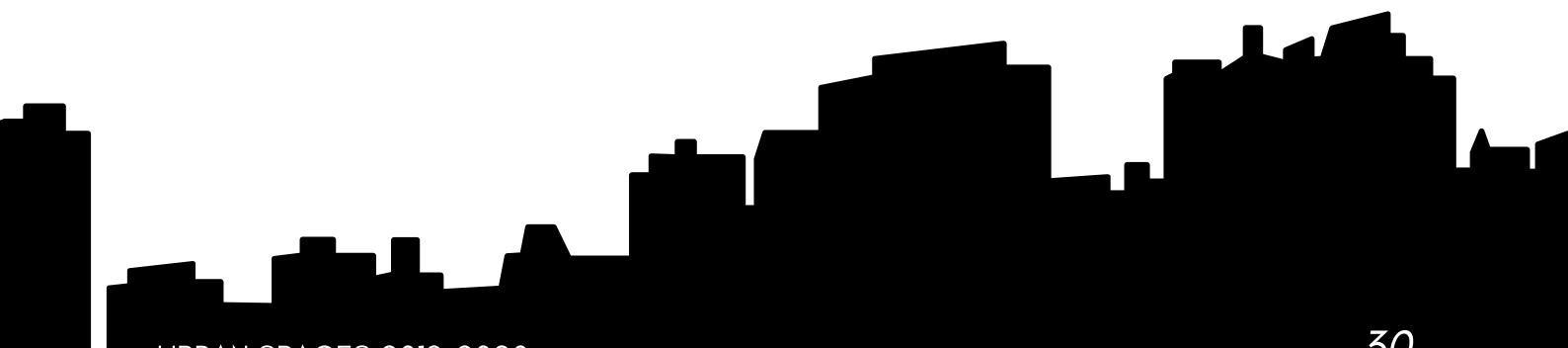
“Photograph is elliptical, so much so that I almost suspect some scenes have been lost in the edit.” (Bradshaw) However, the arguments presented in the scope of this paper bring forth the inevitable, evident possibility that this is precisely what the film intends to be.

In showing Miloni and Rafi as ordinary people in their own respective worlds, brought into an extraordinary and almost unreal circumstances, which allows them to explore an identity outside of what the socio-political structures of urban Mumbai have designed for them. There is a prominent desire for escape that plays within the film and the characters, but it is undercut with the practical world, which has conditioned their respective social identities, and the transience of this escape lingers frame after frame, culminating in an open-ended scene of class consciousness and the awareness of the individual’s helplessness against the socio-cultural forces. It is, nonetheless, worth noting and taking home from Batra’s *Photograph* that the possibility of escape and exploration, through romance transcending the class barriers of the urban cityscape, is in and of itself empowering and optimistic, howsoever limited in its ability to sustain. It is fitting to use the words of *The New York Times* - “Neither are very happy before they meet.” (Harris, Aisha). The optimism of escape in the urban sprawl of Mumbai, connected beyond necessity geographically and yet home to isolated identities and identity-holders otherwise, lies in the power of the human connection, which may not even need to be a lasting romance. Anupama Chopra conveys the optimism of this connection by rightfully stating, “In this frenzy, these two find a semblance of joy with each other.” (Chopra 2:29-2:31).

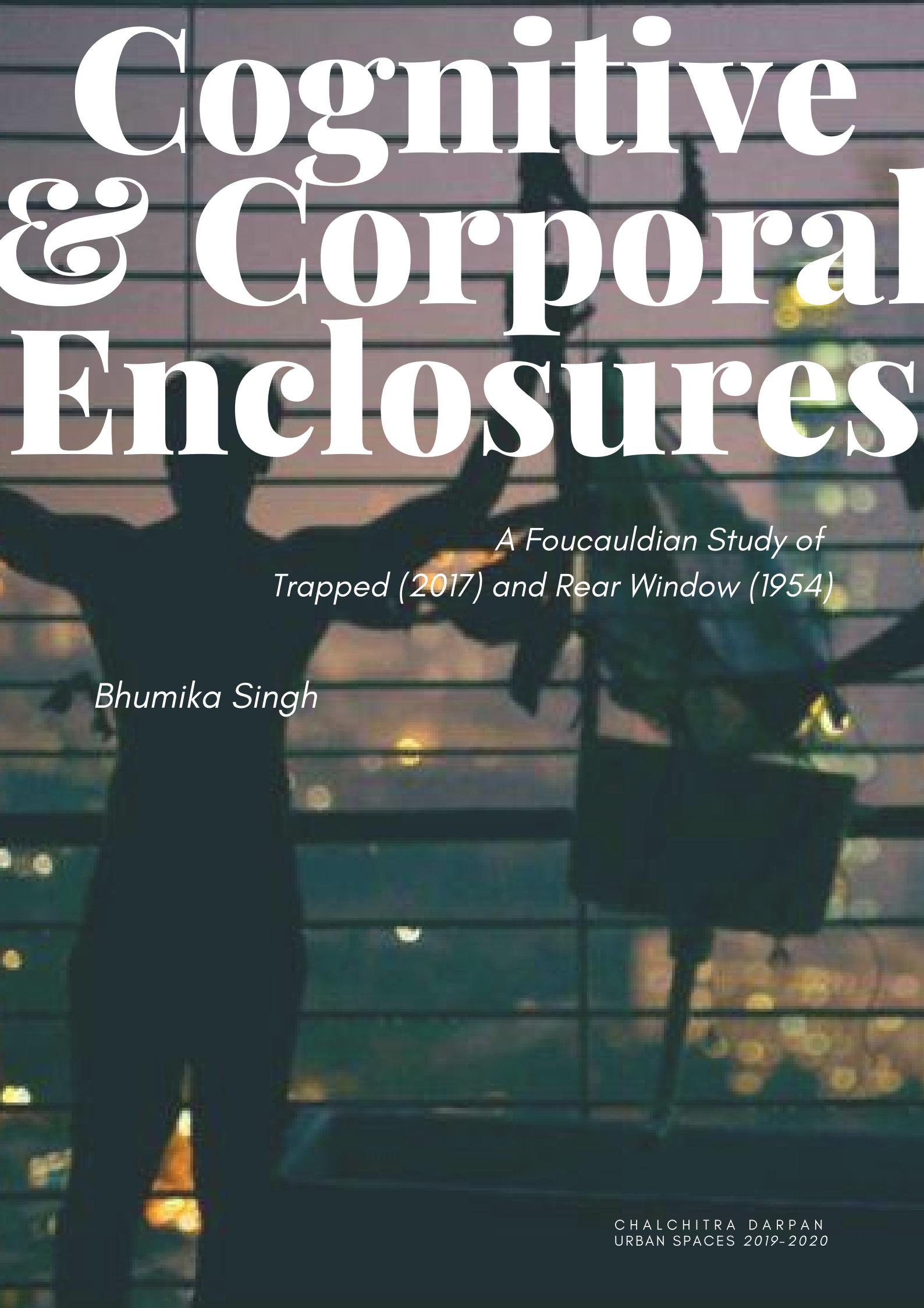
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- [2] Released in 2013, starring Irrfan Khan and Nimrat Kaur in lead roles, it has won over 18 accolades, including the Grand Rail d'Or (Viewers' Choice Award) at the Cannes Film Festival.
- [3] Dilli 6, Life in a... Metro, Masaan, Wake Up Sid are some of the popular examples.
- [4] The Hindi term 'Mayanagri' is popularly associated with the city.
- [5] No name has been awarded to Rafi's grandmother in the film. She will be known as Daadi, the Hindi word for paternal grandmother, throughout the course of this paper.
- [6] This phrase has been taken from E.M. Forster's 1910 novel, Howards End.
- [7] Campa Cola was a drink created by the Pure Drinks Group in the 1970s. The liberalization policy introduced by the P.V. Narsimha Rao Government (1991) brought foreign players into the Indian market, gradually leading to the end of the Campa Cola era.
- [8] The ghost of Tiwari, played by Vijay Raaz in a special appearance, has been compared with the voice-only presence of the neighbor aunty in The Lunchbox.
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# Cognitive & Corporal Enclosures



*A Foucauldian Study of  
Trapped (2017) and Rear Window (1954)*

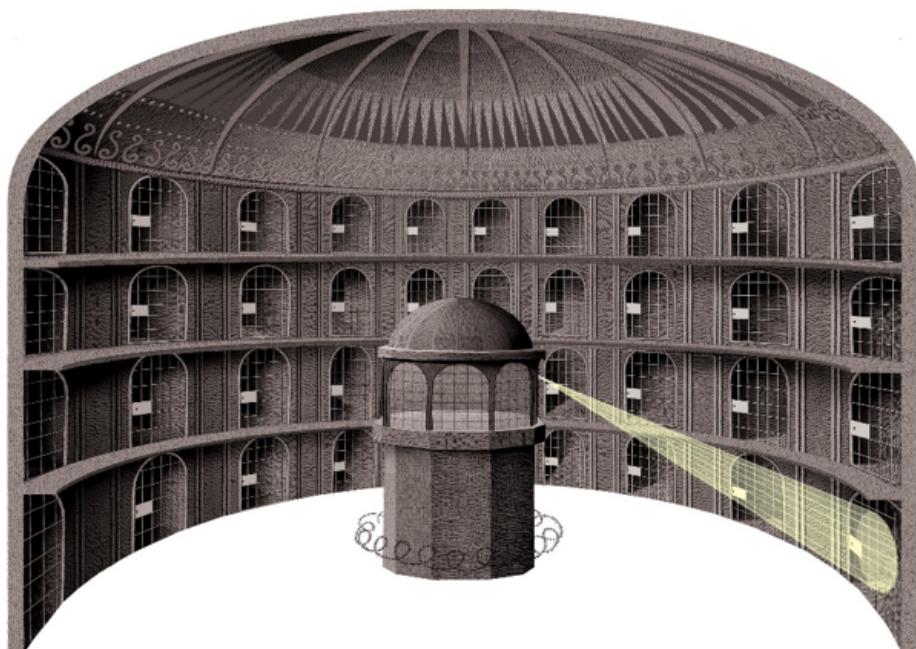
*Bhumika Singh*

*“Everyone locked up in his cage, everyone at his window, answering to his name and showing himself when asked—it is the great review of the living and the dead.”*

— Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish

The Panopticon as designed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century was not merely a prison machine, but an architectural phenomenon. The Panopticon then, as well as in the subsequent centuries served as a building to discipline, punish, reform, and create complacent commodities for production. Jerome E. Dobson and Peter F. Fisher discuss in ‘The Panopticon’s Changing Geography’ the progression in the entity Panopticon from a building to more of a technological and abstract construct. Dobson and Fisher explore the panoptic implications of Big Brother in George Orwell’s 1984 and the Human Tracking Systems being employed in the 21st century apparently to ease our lives. In the films, Trapped and Rear Window, the panoptic machinery is present in both physical and abstract terms. The more interesting aspect of this machinery, however, is how it has become exponentially instrumental in our lives by means of the power and control it exerts on human beings. Michel Foucault has expounded a landmark study of the Panopticon by analysing the relationship between its structure, the power relations manifested by that structure and the effects of those relations on the inmates as well as the guard and staff. Before moving further, it is important to chart the structure of Panopticon as described by Foucault in ‘The Eye of Power’, “*The principle was this: A perimeter building in the form of a ring. At the center of this, a tower, pierced by large windows opening onto the inner face of the ring. The outer building is divided into cells each of which traverses the whole thickness of the building. These cells have two windows, one opening on to the inside, facing the*

*windows of the central tower, the other, outer one allowing daylight to pass through the whole cell. All that is then needed is to put an overseer in the tower and place in each of the cells a lunatic, a patient, a convict, a worker or a schoolboy. The back lighting enables one to pick out from the central tower the little captive silhouettes in the ring of cells. In short, the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer's gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection.” (Image 1)*



It seems almost bizarre when one looks closely at the power relations between human beings and a non-living entity such as technology. In *Trapped* (2017) directed by Vikramaditya Motwane, technology, or the lack of it, provides material for a brilliant cinematic representation of the helplessness of a man trapped inside an apartment on the 35th floor of a high-rise called “Swarg” without any means to contact the outside world. The irony of the building’s name is not lost on the viewers. Most part of the film is shot in an apartment located in Mumbai. The apartment resembles a panoptic cell inhabited by Shaurya, the prisoner. (Image 2)



The most terrifying aspect of the Panopticon present in *Trapped* is that there is no central tower from which a guard can keep an eye on the prisoner. The prisoner, apart from being locked and isolated, is removed from the field of vision of all human beings surrounding him, rendering him helpless and in a state of acute fear and paranoia. Foucault criticizes Bentham for perceiving Panopticon as a disciplinary utopia while its various manifestations in corporal as well as cognitive terms are diabolical in nature. This diabolical nature of Panopticon is exaggerated in the absence of a guard. Foucault, in *The Eye of Power*, addresses the lack of an appropriate guard who can be situated in the central tower. Who is to be given such enormous power over so many isolated individuals? Moreover, who can be entrusted the control of a Panoptic machinery which, if locked from the inside, would become a machine of tyranny?

These questions bring to mind Sartre's gaze[1], and the power it has over an individual. It is the interiorization of the Other's gaze which helps an individual establish his own identity. The Other's existence, even though it ruptures the Self's universe, is vital for the concretization of the Self that is *not the Other*. In '*Who's Got The Look? Sartre's Gaze and Foucault's Panopticism*', Angelina Vaz notes, "*Clearly, the operation of the Panopticon mirrors the events which Sartre says occur in relations with the Other—the decentering of an objectified individual who finds*

*him/herself inscribed and entrapped in a new structure or space which is defined by the power of the gazing subject at the centre of that space.”* This gazing subject is also a reminder of the Derridean center[2] which is superior to the components of a structure.

In *Trapped*, the gaze is virtually absent for Shaurya’s Self. Even though his universe is intact, it is a futile universe as long as there is no one rupturing it to lend Shaurya the realization of his Self. The gaze, which is instrumental to both Sartre and Foucault, can be attributed to the rat in this film. Shaurya refrains from even entering the kitchen despite being parched, only because of the rat’s presence. This incident could be cited as the point of rupture of Shaurya’s universe. It is even possible that the presence of the Other in the rat’s form is what saves Shaurya from complete self-alienation which could result in madness or hysteria. From being a symbol of fear—as the Other is in the beginning of the interaction between the Self and the Other—the rat becomes Shaurya’s friend over the days. This progression draws a trajectory wherein the Self is terrified when the Other disrupts its universe, but proceeds to turn the damage around and make the Other alienated by establishing the Self and taking control of its universe. The rat could be a symbol for Sartre’s gaze, but the gaze of the guard in Foucault’s Panopticon is completely absent. There is a guard present outside the building but his positioning removes Shaurya from his field of vision, and his deafness and illiteracy do not allow him to hear or read Shaurya’s cries for help. This illustrates how important the positioning of the inmates and the guard is inside the Panopticon, a tampering with which could result in disasters as we witness in Shaurya’s case.

This raises two questions: In a 21st century urban setup where accidental imprisonment can easily go unnoticed, are we

completely dependent on the third type of Panopticon[3] i.e. This raises two questions: In a 21st century urban setup where accidental imprisonment can easily go unnoticed, are we completely dependent on the third type of Panopticon[1] i.e. human tracking systems? Are the housing schemes which are designed to cater to the increasing population in urbans hubs dangerous to human lives? The answers to both these questions cannot be absolute. While it is apparent that we are quite dependent on human tracking systems for more reasons than one, it is undeniable that this type of Panopticon undermines our privacy in stealthy and uncontrollable ways. If today, a person alone at home decides to order food but the delivery person turns out to be a criminal, a life would be staked just because of the human tracking system which is actually supposed to help in delivering food. Same is the case with cab services. There have been numerous cases in Delhi itself where cab drivers have been accused of molestation and murder. But in such cases, human tracking systems also come to the rescue. In order to feel safer, most women nowadays tend to send their live location to a trustworthy person, while they are travelling alone. The third type of Panopticon carries with it both pros and cons, just like Bentham's original Panopticon did. The power structure can be toppled in both by changing the person who has access to the central tower or the access to location.

Furthermore, one discovers that the lack of the guard in the central tower would hamper the prisoners even more than the established mores of power. Shaurya is unable to contact the outside world despite his repeated attempts which even include writing on pieces of cardboard with his own blood. The plot of the film and the end that Shaurya meets highlights how the lack of the technological panopticon in the 21st century can be life changing as well as life threatening because the exponential

levels of urban development can only be compatible with human existence by means of technological links between people. Shaurya suffers a lack of food and water, loses his beloved, not to mention the deterioration of health that he suffers. Moreover, it is only by risking his life that he manages to escape a Panopticon which is not merely a cause of paranoia but also a threat to the life of its inhabitant.

We witness quite a contrasting picture of the protagonist in *Rear Window* (1954) directed by Alfred Hitchcock. In this film, the protagonist, Jefferies inhabits the central tower instead of an isolated cell. Even though the inhabitants of the apartments that Jefferies observes from his window are not isolated corporally, they are isolated in more abstract terms. *Rear Window*, set in New York City, seems to depict the best modern adaptation of the Panopticon which seamlessly fits into the life of the modern human being. The 20th century saw the rise of Modernism and modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot whose works depicted the all-pervading loneliness, fragmentation and alienation seeping through the modern lives. We see a presentation of the same in *Rear Window*. Apart from occasional interactions, the inhabitants of the apartments live in partly self-inflicted and partly societal isolation which is poignantly illustrated through various characters including Ms. Lonelyhearts. Jefferies, by means of his leg injury resulting in immobility, attains the power of the guard in the central tower, keeping an eye on everyone. Here, it becomes imperative to recall Foucault's observation about the dynamics of power in the Panopticon, "*This indeed is the diabolical aspect of the idea and all the applications of it. One doesn't have here a power which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over the others. It's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just*

*as much as those over whom it is exercised. This seems to me to be the characteristic of the societies installed in the nineteenth century. Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns. Certainly, everyone doesn't occupy the same position; certain positions preponderant and permit an effect of supremacy to be produced.” [4] (Image 3)*



Jefferies occupies this position of supremacy, ironically due to his corporal immobility. He can keep an eye on everyone in his field of vision, but something that the film fails to explore is Jefferies's own vulnerability to another overseer from amongst his neighbours. Perhaps, it implies that no modern human being cares enough about whatever is happening next door until he/she is bored to death. The practice of observation is merely a source of amusement and pastime unlike in Bentham's and Foucault's Panopticon where observation has a practical purpose often leading to the formation of productive and reformed entities. Jefferies is not an absolute superior in the power dynamics of this panoptic machine. His position is threatened the moment the murderer, Thorwald catches Jefferies looking at him through his window. Nevertheless, Jefferies is able to solve an obscure criminal case by utilizing the power of gazing.

Being a photographer, he has a keen eye, and the boredom of corporal immobility incites him to look for anything engaging

in his surroundings for cognitive stimulation. The most readily available engaging entities, obviously, are his neighbours. Although the accommodations presented in the film do not imitate Bentham's Panopticon, the criteria of the gaze from the central tower that can reach everywhere is fulfilled. Jefferies can look into all the apartments by means of his optic instruments. He hides in the shadows on several occasions while looking at the inhabitants, lending himself the invisibility which is a characteristic of the guard in the central tower. Having looked into the physical manifestations of the Panopticon in this film, it is imperative to explore its consequences and effects on the lives of the virtual prisoners and the guard in the central tower.

In case of *Rear Window*, apart from Bentham's Panopticon, we see traces of a milder version of the telescreen and thought police from George Orwell's *1984*. Milder because the inhabitants of the apartments, although eerily visible to Jefferies for most part of the day, have some means of hiding themselves like curtains and darkness, which are also the reasons behind the prolongation of the uncovering of the crime. The high amount of visibility undermines privacy, but at the same time aids Jefferies and the police to catch a murderer. Two questions arise: how much privacy is right amount of privacy? Should privacy be intrudable? Again, the answers cannot be absolute. While privacy is supposed to be a basic human right, it also becomes imperative to intrude it at times in order to maintain peace and security. Jefferies' hobby of observing people going about their lives in the seeming privacy of their homes comes across as a voyeuristic activity which violates human rights and even the law if it goes beyond an extent. If were not for the uncovering of a murder, Jefferies' habit could not be justified by any sound argument.

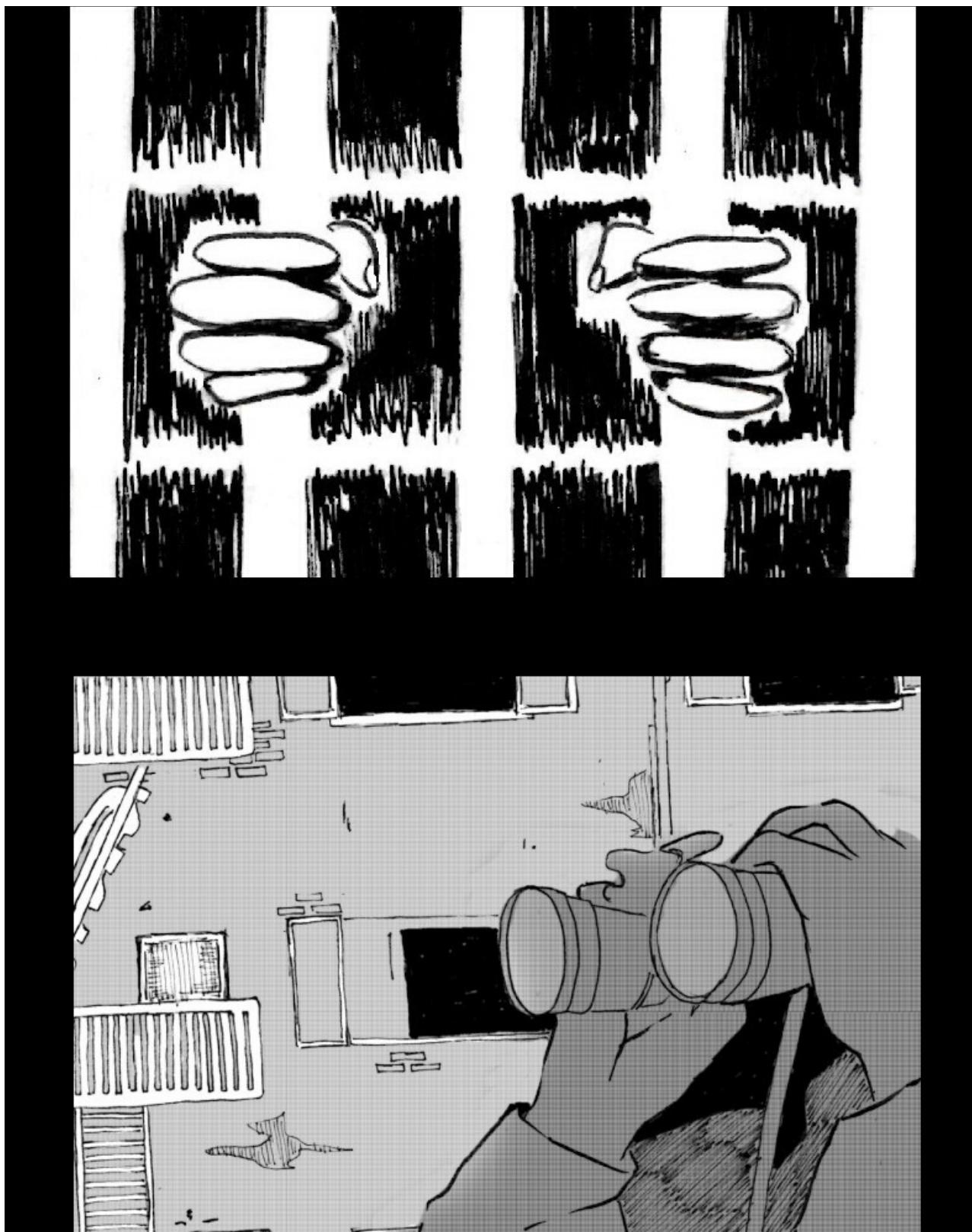
It would have been advisable for him to pass his time by reading some magazines perhaps. The same magazine that his girlfriend, Lisa is seen to read at the end. We discover the undermining of female characters in both these films only by keen observation. Both the films have male protagonists setting examples in their own ways while the females become instruments for their seeming *Bildungsroman* progression. The women provide for a backdrop as well as tools for character development and plot enhancement. While Shaurya's beloved, Noorie is shown to become a victim of patriarchy and marriage, Jefferies' girlfriend, Lisa makes herself agreeable to him only by suiting his interests. This is illustrated by her stealthy swapping of books in the last scene. She poses to be reading a book titled *Beyond the High Himalayas* but as soon as she notices Jefferies relaxing with his eyes closed, she picks up a fashion magazine that is actually interesting to her. Both women succumb to powers that can be predicated to centuries ago but still pervade the urban scenario in scary, subtle and often invisible ways. The screenwriters, however, make the women vital tools by making the male protagonists' fate dependent on them. In the first place, Shaurya gets trapped inside the apartment because he wants to occupy a house which is a prerequisite for marriage. His persistent efforts to get an accommodation for a minimal rent go in vain reflecting the harsh reality of urban spaces. Having no other option, he trusts a shady broker and ends up in the unfortunate "Swarg". Shaurya's liberation is undermined by his losing Noorie who succumbs to an arranged marriage due to Shaurya's unannounced and prolonged absence, aggravated by a lack of money needed to survive independently. Jefferies' victory is facilitated by Lisa when she climbs into the Thorwald's apartment to procure some evidence of the murder. In the end

their relationship attains harmony because the woman virtually gives up a part of her individuality in order to please her partner.

The differences between the endings of the two films throw light on aspects which would facilitate a study of the significance of urbanity and enclosures. In *Trapped*, Shaurya manages to break the balcony bars and climb down to another apartment from where he manages to escape the building. The final liberation of the central character might come across as a momentary respite from the anxieties induced throughout his struggle. Nevertheless, Shaurya's silence afterwards, for the guard as well as for Noorie who is now married to someone else gives a tragic conclusion to the film. Shaurya's physical liberation is succeeded by his life in the real world falling apart. In contrast to this ending, *Rear Window* leaves us wondering at how physical pain falls dim in front of the unbridled pleasure of victory.

Jefferies manages to get a murderer caught, only by means of his cognitive and observational skills, without even budging from his apartment. In a haphazard chase at the end, preceded by a confrontation with the murderer himself, Jefferies breaks his second leg as well. At the very end of the film, we see Jefferies relaxing in his chair with a broad smile plastered to his face while Lisa sits in the same room reading: an image symbolising the restoration of perfect harmony. It is also significant that only after undertaking the quest to catch the murderer together with Lisa, does Jefferies notice her other side that is adventurous and courageous. It is a subtle jibe at stereotypically 'feminine' tendencies in Lisa such as being passionate about clothes and fashion. Her daring seems to compensate for a lack that was putting Jefferies off. It is a highly regressive understanding of women and their interests.

The entire film is not just about the uncovering of the crime but also about the progression of a relationship which Jefferies earlier perceived to be incompatible. Nevertheless, one must not forget that the harmony at the end is restored on Jefferies' terms.



The contrast between the trajectory of romantic relationships in these two films also says a lot about the benefits or drawbacks one faces by virtue of his positioning in the Panopticon. While Shaurya is in an isolated and virtually guard-less prison, Jefferies himself is the guard. Jefferies attains enormous power despite as well as because of his physical immobility. Shaurya is mobile but within the confines of his cell. Noorie cannot contact Shaurya by any means, but Lisa can contact Jefferies easily. It seems that cognitive mobility and stimulation resulting in successful communication with fellow human beings is more necessary than corporal mobility for survival in the modern urban context. Hence, the difference in outcomes of the romances. Hence, a highly undermined victory in Shaurya's case, and a glorious victory in Jefferies' case.

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- [1] In Sartre's philosophy, the Other has the power to gaze at an entity called the Self, whose Universe is disrupted by the gaze, reducing it to an object. The Self is established again only after a transfer of the ability to gaze, from the Other to the Self. This results in the Other's Universe being disrupted, and it becoming the object of the gaze. Hence, the Self cannot exist without the Other. For further elucidation, refer to *Being and Nothingness* (1943).
- [2] In *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*, Derrida explains how everything around us is bound by structures which are held together and governed by single centers. The components of the structures function according to the rules laid out by the center, while the center is always exempt from these rules. Hence, the center, at the same time, exists within and without the structure.
- [3] Dobson, Jerome E., and Peter F. Fisher. "The Panopticon's Changing Geography." *Geographical Review*. 97.3 (2007): 307–323.
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### Image 1

Adam Simpson, Panopticon, accessed 24 February 2020,  
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### Image 2

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### Image 3

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AAMIR KHAN PRODUCTIONS presents

# Mirroring Connections in Rao's Mumbai



An Analysis of *Dhobi Ghat*

Saman Waheed



CHALCHITRA DARPARN  
URBAN SPACES 2019-2020

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## Introduction

Spaces mean entirely different things to different people. There is no universal definition that you can attach with this word because there is none. It is used in myriad contexts to mean myriad distinct things and carries an unfathomable depth. However, often we tend to see spaces as voids whose primary prerequisite is that it should be filled with something, even if that something makes absolutely no sense to the space in consideration. We believe that nothing should be empty and that there should be no free space anywhere, whilst forgetting a very simple fact that spaces are places where the human psyche gets to develop. Throughout our lives, we are caught up in some or the other stage of development - be it physical, mental or emotional. What aids or affects these developmental processes, are the people who come in our life and leave a lasting impression on our mind as well as the space or setting where an interaction had taken place. The paper would focus on this concept of spaces and how it affects the relationships of people with each other and their relationship with the space itself.

## **Urban Spaces, Rural Spaces and the city of Mumbai as a Space**

The concept of urban spaces, which is the diverging point of this paper, finds maximum relevance in a country like India, because of the clear-cut, almost hierarchical divide that exists within the structure of this nation. There are two extremes of the continuum - one is the rural and the other is the urban. Most of the people in the country lie somewhere in the middle of this continuum albeit leaning more towards the rural side, while a handful of the privileged masses lean towards the urban side. The structure of the urban and rural spaces is starkly opposite, with luxury cars and branded attires on one side while the persistence of a dearth of even the basic necessities on the

other. This however, does not mean that people from rural spaces do not exist in urban spaces or vice versa. Urban spaces abound in people from rural spaces who find employment opportunities or come to the city to fulfil their dreams of making it big one day. Rural spaces may have people belonging to an urban space, probably due to job locations, various projects, or a lifestyle change among other reasons. What we are concerned with, within this paper is exploring the most urban of spaces in India, that is the city of dreams – Mumbai ; through the premise of the Bollywood film, Dhobi Ghat, internationally known as Mumbai Diaries. The contrasting lives of the people and the convenient location of the place makes Mumbai an essential favourite of the filmmakers. For a long time, films have been based on Mumbai, be it Bombay - focusing on the riots following the Babri Masjid crisis or Chandni Bar - that explores the life of a girl forced into prostitution in the big city or Black Friday - made on the 1993 bomb blasts in Mumbai and its aftermath or even Page 3 which showcases the negative aspects of the glamour world that takes its roots in Mumbai. There is a sense of commonality in all these films: there is a crisis situation involved in the backdrop of Mumbai which is to say that, it does not function as a primary point in any of these movies. Dhobi Ghat – a film that falls into the league of films[1] [2] that are set in Mumbai, is different from all the rest in multiple ways. First of all, there is no essential overarching problem that features in this film. It is more focussed on the characters and their development in a given setting. The characters obviously deal with their ‘own personal problems’ and solve it within their own separate context or with the help of other characters. But these problems do not overwhelm the entire narrative of the movie. In an interview with IANS, Kiran Rao, the debutante director of this

film specifies her inspiration behind this film and says, “*It's a story of Mumbai that might have remained untold to you. It's as real and authentic as I could make it. Films on Mumbai have always dealt with any one aspect of it at a time. I have tried to show all the facets of the city.*” (Baksi).

In order to impart a better understanding of the film, it is integral to know how the filmmaker has visualized the story. Kiran Rao in her interview with IANS elaborates on this: “*When I started to write the film, I didn't think of the genre or what type of film it will be. I had an idea of a story of four people from very different classes and worlds. I didn't plan to write particularly this story. The idea in due course developed into this film. But the city of Mumbai has always been the constant inspiration behind this film.*” (Baksi).

### **Dhobi Ghat, The Film and Its Title**

The filmmaker's visualization of the film is translated on the screen by the actors and for a film like Dhobi Ghat, the interpretation of every character by the actors forms a necessary part of the plot of the movie. As mentioned earlier, each character has a relationship with the other, however unconventional it may be and each character is bonded with the city in their own nuanced fashion. Their relationship with the city is predominantly dependent on the purpose with which they have come there. On a very basic level, we can categorize the relationships of the characters with Mumbai as such Arun is an artist who prefers solitude over company and keeps shifting places in order to find inspiration for his artwork. Shai who is an American banker wishes to pursue her hobby of amateur photography and wants to utilize the space of Mumbai for the same. Munna who is a dhobi[1] by day and a rat killer by night is a Salman Khan fan and wishes to get his big break into

Bollywood. Yasmin is a newlywed bride from Uttar Pradesh who yearns for her family, especially her brother and resorts to making videotapes for the same. However, on further analysis, we find that there is more to each character than is apparent to us. It seems that every character is different from the other, before they find each other, but that is not the case. There is a thread of commonality that binds them together and that thread is the feeling of isolation and entrapment. All of them are trapped in some way or the other. Some are trapped by the societal conventions while the others are trapped by their own inhibitions. All of them seek a companionship of some sort but are too afraid to actually ask for it. Nikhat Kazmi of Times News Network in her review of the film writes very aptly, "*It's a somewhat dysfunctional foursome, desperately seeking an anchor in the shifting sands of a maddening city.*" (Kazmi).

Before moving into the relationships of the characters further, it is necessary to take a look at the title of the film. It is essential in the sense that it imparts a deeper understanding into the purpose of this research paper. Dhobi Ghat is one of the oldest laundromats in India, built in 1890. This fact provides it with the status of a historical location, so much so, that it has become a site for visit by a number of tourists from both India and abroad. Using the name of such a renowned location works for the film, as it truly showcases the essence of the city that the filmmaker is trying to capture. Speaking about the title in an interview with India Real Time, Rao says: "*It is actually a metaphorical title. I feel that Dhobi Ghat (defines) Mumbai... It is representative of Mumbai: clothes from all classes come together and get washed in the same water... That's the same with people of Mumbai, no matter what class they belong to, you will always see a tinge of Mumbai in them.*" (Sahni).

The title also works because one of the main characters in the

film, Munna is a dhobi and most of his scenes are centred around Dhobi Ghat[2] and it is just not his place of work, but also a place by the means of which he gets a chance at interacting with people from the higher classes of society, which include Shai and Arun. It is his only shot at getting a taste of the life that he so desires to be a part of.



## The Female Characters in Dhobi Ghat

Unlike other films based on cities, Dhobi Ghat opens with some jerky movements of a handheld video camera inside a taxi while it is pouring outside. This is Mumbai, captured in its actual charm and glory, with people constantly trying to become one with the city. But, it is not that easy. The woman behind the camera, who is later identified as Yasmin Noor, comes from the small town of Malihabad in Uttar Pradesh and has a really hard time settling in and building a relationship with a city that is so uncommon to her. In her conversation with the taxi driver, she very clearly says, “५ महीने हो गये, फिर भी सब नया सा लगता है।” (“It has been 5 months, still everything feels new and strange.”; self-translation; Dhobi Ghat ; 01:13-03:00), thereby exposing us to the fact that not all residents of Mumbai share the same kind of romanticism with the city as is often displayed. She does not find herself to be a part of the crowd hanging out at Chowpatty Beach. In the same scene inside the taxi, while talking to Imran, her brother via the video camera, she says, “मेरे ख्याल में ज़्यादातर लोग यहाँ की खुली हवा खाने आते हैं, जिसकी बड़ी कमी महसूस होती है।” (“In my opinion, most people come here to feel the fresh air, which is lacking here.”; self-translation ; Dhobi Ghat ; 01:13-03:00). She therefore, understands that there are people like her in the city who feel unsettled and are not very familiar with the city; however she lacks the courage to find these people and associate with them in order to minimize her alienation from the city. Yasmin constantly tries to form her own unique relationship with Mumbai while exploring the city and recording all her experiences for her dear brother, who is never shown to us apart from the two photos that Arun later discovers in her box. A very interesting aspect of the story of Yasmin is the fact that she never appears on the filmmaker’s camera i.e we only see her footage on the video camera and hear her voice overs for

the video that she herself records. This is probably because she is the biggest outsider in the city of Mumbai, and irrespective of much she tries, she is unable to accept the city as her home. In the first video letter that she records for her brother, she can be heard saying “बम्बई ने अभी तक तो बदला नहीं मुझे, मैं वही यास्मीन हूँ।” (“Mumbai has not changed me yet, I am the same Yasmin.” ; self translation; Dhobi Ghat ; 26:20-26:33). The relationship she shares with her husband also does not make her feel at ease and eventually we find out that her husband was cheating on her with another woman. A story that presumably started with so much hope and optimism ends in grief and loss.

The other female character in the film, Shai comes from a very privileged Parsi family, so much so that she is on a sabbatical from her job in the United States and has an opportunity to practice her hobby of photography in Mumbai. The stay of Shai in Mumbai and her relationship with the city is more linked to human connections and personal fulfilments. In the initial stages of her character arc, we see Shai starting to experience a very deep connection with Arun after their one-night stand at Arun’s place. When she realizes that Arun does not share the same feelings as her, she feels rejected by the person she probably sought validation from. It is from here that we see her character actually develop and the bond that she is going to share with the city finally starts emerging into the spotlight. Shai is an ideal character in the sense that she is extremely non-judgemental and is not afraid to call-out her friends when they disregard the lower stratum of society. She forms an unconventional friendship with Munna (Zohaib) - her dhobi; a friendship that is real, honest and follows the adage of ‘A friend in need is a friend indeed’. Both of them help each other in their own separate ways. While Shai takes Munna closer to his dreams of becoming an actor by doing a portfolio shoot for him; Munna

familiarizes her with the city so that she can form her own unique bond with the city. For Shai, befriending Munna is an act of active rebellion because she comes from a position of extreme privilege where being friends with your employee does not fit into the social mores of that particular contextual reality. Shai seems to dismiss all of these conventions and spends time with Munna similar to how she does with Pes, her Parsi friend. It is very obvious that there are certain differences with the way she carries herself out in both the situations, but that is not because she thinks that Munna does not match up to her standards, it is simply because Munna and Pes come from two very different parts of Mumbai and she does not want to or cannot pull them out of their comfortable spaces. With the guided help of Munna, she is able to capture Mumbai the way she perceives it through Munna's lens, in terms of the dhobi ghat workers, the rat killers, the market places, the construction workers and most importantly the main focus of her photography, Arun.

Through Munna, Shai wishes to know Arun and how he has spent his life before their interaction. It seems a little unclear, as to whether Shai captures the shots of Arun in the personal capacity of a scorned lover or in the professional capacity of a photographer taking candid shots of her subject. In the end, when we see that Munna has shifted houses due to his cousin's murder, she asks him to keep in touch and keep meeting her, showing thereby that she valued their friendship and it was not just a give and take relationship. Therefore, reiterating the point mentioned earlier, that for Shai, Mumbai becomes the place where she participates in meaningful human interactions not only with people but the city itself. For her, Mumbai is the subject of her art.

Having talked about both the female protagonists of the film, we

can see that there is a clearly observable symmetry in the characters of these women, which makes them the part of the same category if such a one exists. Both of them have been rejected by the men in their lives and to find some purpose in their lives they have sought refuge behind their camera - Yasmin behind her video camcorder and Shai behind her professional camera. It is very important to note that throughout the duration of the film, the characters of Shai and Yasmin do not interact at all. They never even exist in the same frame. This has been done probably, on purpose by Rao to convey and emphasize a larger point that both of these characters, with their cameras interact with the same city, yet hold different conceptualisations in their mind. Nevertheless, through their interaction with the same city, they become familiar to each other in at least some sense of the word.

### **The Male Characters in Dhobi Ghat**

Dhobi Ghat would not have been entirely complete, had there not been a titular character in the film. This is not to disregard the fact that the title refers to a specific location of Mumbai but simply to mean that having Munna as a dhobi in the film, adds a newer dimension to it. Munna displays the characteristics of the friendly boy next door. He is shown as a hardworking washerman who also works as a rat killer at night. He seems very content with his life and saves enough in order to use that money to pursue his dream of becoming an actor in Bollywood. The relationship that Munna shares with the city is one that is largely based on survival instincts, which we observe when Shai asks him as to why he had come to Mumbai. His innocent answer says it all, “पेट भरने के लिए, और किस लिए आने का।” (“To fill the stomach, what other reason is there to come.”; self-translation; Dhobi Ghat ; 31:46-31:55). In his opinion, there is no

reason greater than that of curbing hunger and finding a job to relocate oneself. He has left his hometown of Darbhanga in Bihar and settled in Mumbai in order to seek employment. As discussed earlier, there blooms an unconventional friendship between Munna and Shai ; unconventional due to the starkly visible class difference that exists between them. While Shai is not conscious of this class difference because she comes from the upper class and has never really been on the other side as a victim, Munna is extremely conscious of this difference. This becomes very apparent when Shai invites him inside her house for tea and there exists a visible discomfort that he experiences. Due to this class consciousness, Munna is initially of the opinion that Shai is simply patronizing him in order to feel better about herself. This is because Munna feels that he is an outsider to the world that Shai belongs to and as a result, a little apprehensive of Shai's friendship. He lets go of his inhibitions when he realizes that Shai's friendship is genuine and unbiased. As time passes, Munna falls in love with Shai but the subtle awareness of his class always lurks at the back of his head, which is why he is never able to confess his feelings to Shai.

Munna also works as a dhobi for Arun and they share a very civil and friendly bond with each other. Munna in a conversation with Shai reveals that it was he who made the first step in pulling Arun out of the melancholia, following his divorce. Working for both Shai and Arun makes him a passive link in the Arun-Shai dynamic. Munna interacts with both of them on an individual level when both of them do not interact with each other. It is through Munna only that Shai discovers Arun's new residence. Later in the film, we see Munna grappling with loss when his cousin is murdered at the hands of the people belonging to a drug mafia gang. He however, does not get overwhelmed by this loss, and comes to the realization that life

must go on and that living must be made, so he actively makes efforts to do so and his survival instinct kicks in again as he becomes aware of the fact that, it is he who has to look after his cousin's brother and mother. The climax of the film is extremely poignant for Munna's character and to define the kind of bond that he has with the city. In the climactic scene, where we know that he is dealing with the problems of his own life at the time, he is seen running after Shai's car to hand her the new address of Arun. Before this, when Shai had asked if he knew where Arun lived now he had denied and had blatantly lied that Arun must have left for Australia to go to his ex-wife. This behaviour of his stems from a position of jealousy as he knows that he can never have Shai in his life. Had this been the end of the film, the audience would not have appreciated the character of Munna as much. The fact that he instantly becomes conscious of his mistake and wishes to rectify it shows the honesty of his character. In the end, he faintly smiles after giving Shai the address, probably because of the knowledge that from a passive link of being a common dhobi to both Shai and Arun, he has perhaps become a harbinger of love for them. Therefore, from this analysis we can infer that Munna's relationship with the city that can be traced by his journey is one of loss, a little heartbreak and a lot of acceptance and satisfaction.

Arun is portrayed as a reserved painter who binds all the characters together. He is one who prefers quietude and solitude. He is not a loner per se, but enjoys his own company over that of the others. For Arun, Mumbai is a subject for his artwork, similar to that of Shai. While talking about his paintings, he says, "Bombay, my muse, my whore, my beloved." (08:00-08:15). This is enough to describe the kind of relationship that Arun shares with Mumbai. Even though he remains objectively away from the actual bustle of life in

Mumbai, he adores the city with all its nuances, its people, its buildings and its weather. It seems like a relationship where he has accepted the city as his own and the city, him. Arun in the beginning of the film , has a one-night stand with Shai and does not want to continue the relationship any further. It is not like he does not like Shai, it is just that for him, the active company of a person was desirable only for that specific time duration. When Arun changes his house in the initial stages of the film, he shifts to a place in the older parts of Mumbai where people from the lower strata of the society reside. Like Shai, he too is not conscious of the class difference because he too comes from a position of social privilege and has probably never been victimized due to his class. Since he keeps to himself and does not feel the need to socialize, living in that area does not emerge as a problem for him. In this new house, he finds a box that probably belonged to the old residents. He could have easily thrown that box away, but something in his inquisitive mind stops him. It is possible he considers this as a chance to find some inspiration for his new series of artwork, because after all, he has shifted to this place for such a purpose only. In the box, he finds two photographs, a ring and three cassettes which are marked as, ‘पहली चिट्ठी, दूसरी चिट्ठी, तीसरी चिट्ठी’ (first letter, second letter, third letter). Simply out of curiosity he plays the first cassette, to find Yasmin Noor and her dealings with her newly married life and adventures in the new city. Through the cassettes, Arun comes to know that Yasmin had recorded them to send them as letters to her brother, Imran. He tries to locate the whereabouts of the family or the maid that worked for them. In this instance of metadrama, he becomes immensely involved in Yasmin’s life, so much so that he begins to think that he is a part of it. He comes to like the passive company of Yasmin better than anything else. He dedicates himself entirely to this

self-undertaken project where he interprets whatever he sees on the video footage thereby adding elements to his painting. In the course of the cassettes, he sees the transformation of Yasmin from a happy and hopeful bride to a rejected and betrayed woman, whose life is nothing but despair no matter how hard she tries. The third cassette is abrupt as Yasmin apologizes to her brother and wishes to convey the same to her parents. Arun, subconsciously knows what would have happened next, yet he rewinds the tape in the hope that there was something he had missed. When he sees the fan from the spot where Yasmin used to record her videos, missing, the reality of the situation dawns on him and he runs out of his own house. He feels guilty, for he thinks that he could have done something to prevent this, hence feels trapped, because of this guilt. It is like watching a film and seeing your favourite character die, while you sit right there, trapped and unable to do anything to help it. This experience deeply affects Arun and he is forced to leave. We see the completed painting inspired from Yasmin's life hanging at his new house, unable to understand whether it would go to Arun's personal collection or would he commercialize this experience and make money out of the painting. We therefore, see Arun vicariously living through the tragedy of Yasmin. In an interview with India West, Kiran Rao in this regard says, "*...though not physically seen by Arun, she does influence him deeply with her tragedy and so she is connected to him, and through him to the others.*" (Vijayakar).

Thus, the dynamic nature of Arun's relationship with the city comes to the surface, from accepting and being accepted to hope from a passive connection and to finally a feeling of entrapment.

Munna and Arun are the two radii of the same circle of life. Both of their life stories bear some resemblance to each other

indirectly. There is a sense of impermanence in both of their lives, whether it be in terms of people or houses. They cope with loss, Munna with an active loss and Arun with a passive one, with the end result of the mechanism being a change of residence, the only difference being that Munna is compelled by circumstances to move out while Arun is compelled by his own guilt.

### **The Water Imagery in Dhobi Ghat**

In the interview with India Real Time, Kiran Rao has said, “*Mumbai is the fifth character of the film; it is the character which influences every other character. It is omnipresent.*” (Sahni).

Going by this description, if we take Mumbai as a character, the overarching feature of it seems to be the various imageries of water. Mumbai has always been typically identified with water. It figures as an essential element of each of the four narratives in the film. The water imagery is first portrayed via the torrential rains in Mumbai which can be constructive for some and destructive for the others. The film opens with the scene of rain pouring down - while some people are enjoying and dancing in it, others are looking for shelter to escape this downpour. While talking about her impression of the rain, Yasmin on her video camera says, “यहाँ की बारिश बिल्कुल अलग है, न कभी काम होती है, न कभी रुकने का नाम लेती है।” (“The rain here is completely different, neither does it lessen nor does it stop.”; self-translation; Dhobi Ghat ; 34:16-34:40). The rain has distinct meanings for each of the other characters as well. For Yasmin, it is another part of her existence in Mumbai that she must record on her camera to complete her documentation of the city. For Shai, it is a part of the beauty of the city that she must partake, but from a distance only. For Munna, the rain does not affect him much on a personal level. It does not matter to him if he

gets drenched in the rain, because he is already drenched in the love that he has for Shai. However, the rain does pose a threat to his existence as it enters his house through the holes in the roof and he must protect his place from that. For Arun, it gives him the time to introspect and reflect on his life, his divorce and his son. He watches the rain, unlike Shai, not soaking in its beauty but thinking of other things that affect him deeply.

The other images of water in this film are the beaches and the oceans. These are observed through the footage of Yasmin and later through Arun. While on the beach, Yasmin keeps writing different things on the sand and the waves keep coming at it. Yasmin cannot help but reflect and comment on this phenomenon, saying, “यहाँ कुछ नहीं टिक सकता, और यह समुन्दर सब कुछ लेकर चुप रहता है।” (“Nothing lasts here and this ocean takes in everything and remains quiet.”; self-translation.; Dhobi Ghat; 01:00:04-01:00:20). She understands that she can tell all her secrets to the ocean and they would remain safe till eternity. As talked about earlier, Arun, who has developed a connection with Yasmin, visits the same beach that Yasmin did in the video. In this scene, he can be seen wearing a locket with Yasmin’s ring on it. This is important in the sense that this is one of the only scenes where we see Arun free and happy and his character imbues positivity. Thus, Yasmin has had an impact on him that has rid him of his burdens, even if the effect is temporary.

## **Conclusion**

Through previously mentioned evidence, this paper while talking about the concept of urban spaces, has established the importance of relationships that people form with each other and with the space that they live in, even when the relationship is extremely non-conventional in nature. It adds value to their lives and transforms them in one way or the other. Here, in

Dhobi Ghat every character undergoes a metamorphosis however trivial it may be, it is never inconsequential. The paper also establishes that an urban space, like Mumbai can exist as a character in the film, being in the background, communicating with the characters in individualized ways and finally emerging as an all-encompassing figure that can exist on its own even if the other characters within it are displaced. In the last section, the paper talks about water as an essential feature of the character that is Mumbai and elucidates on its significance for the characters and to the city itself.

## References

- [1] Dhobi means washerman in English, however, it has a different connotation in Hindi, as the word also refers to a caste community in India whose profession historically has been washing clothes.
- [2] Ghat is a series of steps that lead to a river. Here Dhobi Ghat is a location in Mumbai as explained earlier.
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# The Bollywood Reel

A collage of images from Indian cinema. At the top, a woman in a sari is shown from behind, looking at a row of golden bells hanging from a temple gopuram. In the center, a woman in a light blue sari walks away from the viewer, her back to the camera. In the bottom right corner, a white dove is perched on a hand. In the background, there's a blurred image of a temple with a dome and intricate carvings.

Delhi in moving images

*Srija Sanyal*

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URBAN SPACES 2019-2020

Films reflect the society and its everyday nuances weaved with its mundane subtleties. Bollywood, the cynosure of Indian cinema to the western world, has stood as a crucial witness to the changing phases of society, captured at a particular time and a particular space. This ‘space’ often talks of a city, a town or a village, juxtaposed well with the protagonist’s narrative. The spatial coverage, therefore, becomes a mirror image of the slowly budding romance between a particular location and the film’s narrative. The eastern world reflected a city in transformation, perhaps aptly for the first time, in the 1963 release **Mahanagar**, in a never-seen-before-like avatar. The Big City, a child of the maestro Satyajit Ray, captured the city of Kolkata caught in the web of transformation. It was not only the characters that were experiencing changes and upheavals but also the *Tilottoma Nagari* experiencing and struggling hard to accommodate her denizen’s changing moods. By this time, the west already had a couple of films into its kitty to boast of its ability to capture the mosaic of urban spaces and associated emotions. Whether it was **La Vie En Rose** (2007) aptly capturing the lingering sound of Piaf’s song in the Paris’ streets, or the dark alleys of New York in Scorsese’s **Taxi Driver** (1976) echoing the step-by-step decadence of the protagonist into the rabbit hole of depression and rage, Hollywood had already commenced its journey to explore the urban moods. Its eastern counterpart, Bollywood, however, had a fewer release in terms of urban captures in its reels, though films like **Sadgati** (1981) and **Mother India** (1957) were the masterpieces for their spatial representation of agrarian India. A few decades later, India witnessed the rise of the deterritorialized citizens, which ushered in an era of the on-the-move population who are continually transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. Globalization became the trending word with the rolling reel

capturing the whereabouts of the real. While the rest of the country managed to maintain their ‘regional’ flavors, Delhi emerged as a global melting pot in the truest sense. Soon the city found itself as a protagonist in the silver screens voicing the hybrid ideologies. Considering strictly the Bollywood reel with the post-2000 releases, urban spaces of Delhi in relation with their representation in the Indian cinema will be discussed herein, with a pinch of cosmopolitanism sprinkled evenly over the article.

One of the foremost Bollywood names that immediately emerges on the surface when talking of Delhi is undoubtedly the 2001 Mira Nair directorial **Monsoon Wedding**. Marriages are never out of season, and the film completely bases itself on this fundamental principle of the Big Fat Indian Wedding while sticking to its conceptual ideal of cosmopolitanism. A comical fusion of American independent film and Bollywood, the film, at the same time, can be taken as a critique of the very cosmopolitan ideas that it attempts hard to portray. While the minority elites from the postcolonial nations develop a sense of ‘cosmopolitanism’ among themselves, they certainly cannot be associated with the liberal ramifications that the idea brings with itself. Rather it is the pseudo-culture that gets conceived in the cracks of cosmopolitan concrete with the class, caste and religion, along with dissent narratives as its offspring.

Set in the posh New Delhi suburb, the film centers on the Vermas who are busy putting up a grand and quite expensive arranged Punjabi Hindu wedding for their daughter Aditi. Class distinctions, along with globalized feminist voices amidst the chaotic grandeur typically associated with the South Asian weddings, make quite a clear way in the film. The wedding becomes the battleground for the convergence of diversified ideologies when the extended family scattered across the



diaspora come under the same roof. The city becomes the witness to the mayhem that steadily brews with the bourgeois (Image 1) ideals being the only synchronizing cord. The Early 2000s were marked by the ushering of branded consumer goods which made their way to the living rooms, and took along with them the American dream of a lavish lifestyle, liberated sexual chatters, and the NRIs, whose gratitude of settling in abroad are deeply rooted in the nostalgia of the homeland memories. This was a time when India was undergoing significant transformations in terms of not only technology and media entertainment, but the cultural shape-shifting was on its wildest spree as aggressive attempts were being made by confused souls to break free from the convention and embrace the 'modernized' model of life. Delhi, somehow became the focal point of all these transformations, as it stood as a witness to the arrival of penniless netizens in the postcolonial world, who will again leave their newfoundland with nostalgic hearts, only to return with dollars in the pockets and customized baggage of bourgeois ideals. Nair's film reflects this confused coexistence of layered ideologies at the backdrop of Delhi. Both the city and

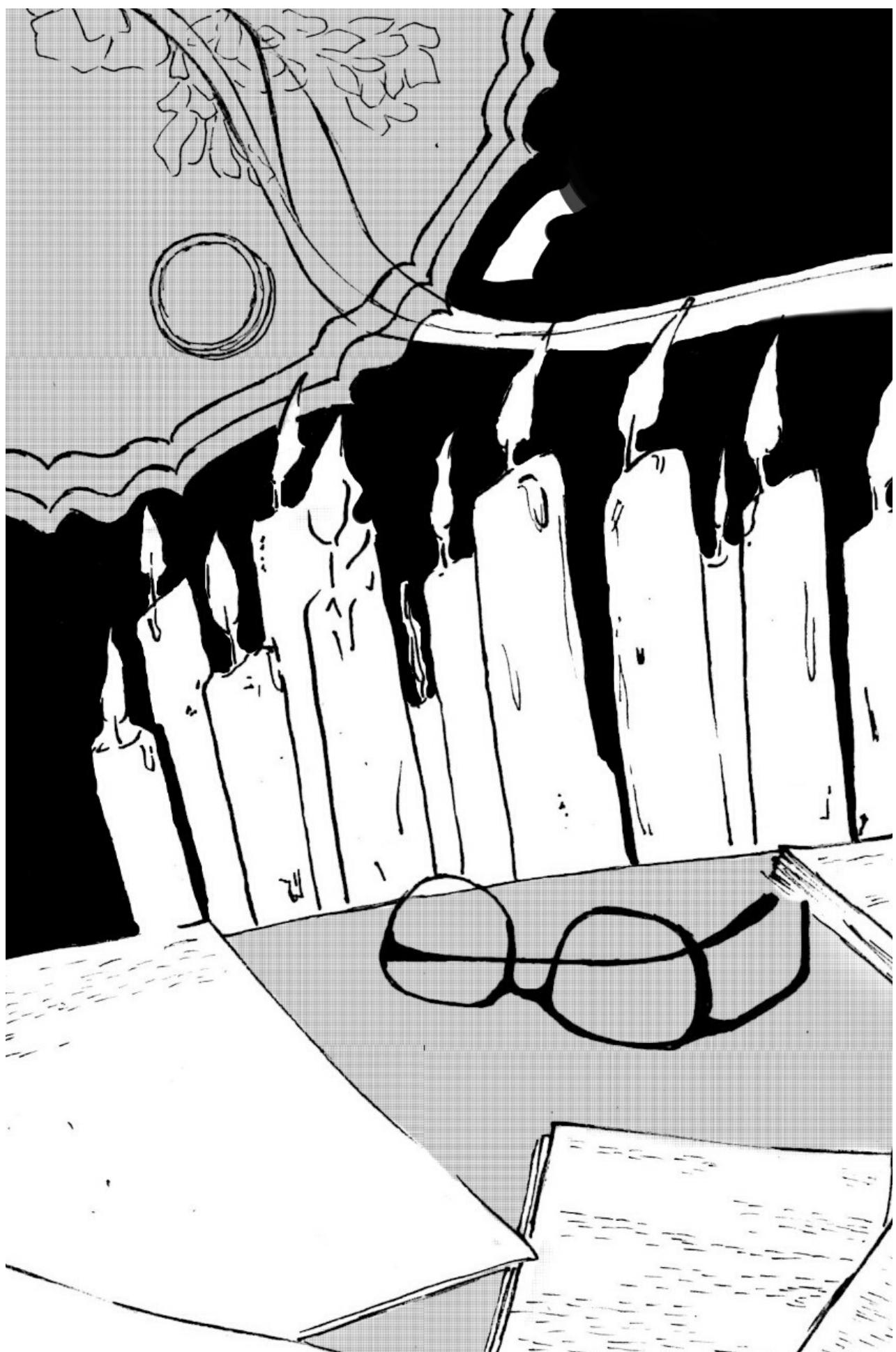
the film, reflective of India as a whole, mirror the ‘cosmopolitics’ of the time, which founded a bridge between the east and the non-European west, thus opening gateways for varied possibilities, experiences, choices and regrets. For the first time, Delhi home welcomed and was welcomed by the world, which stands on the verge of rapid globalization and deconstruction of numerous ideologies for the construction of novel models.



However, as the western floodgates were opened just a decade back and the TV went from 2 state-owned channels airing Chitrahar, Ramayan and Shaktiman, to a plethora of channels with daily soaps and the rise of Ekta Kapoor-esque perspectives of life, there was a significant surge in the consumerist ideals as well. Now the movie-going audience consisted majorly of under-25-year-olds with liberated souls belonging to the ‘be young, have fun’ bandwagon (Dilip 2008). Brimming with a realistic storyline, balanced patriotic feel, and a refreshingly youthful cast and characters, Rang De Basanti (henceforth referred to as RDB), a directorial venture of Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, was the “moral, social and political allegory”. (Image 2)

By blending history along with the nationalist struggle, idealism and humanitarianism along with contemporary politics, religious fundamentalism, and the lack of social responsibility, Mehra provides us with a mirror to look inwards and think about the way we live and the choices we make” (Dilip 2008). Apart from the corporate giants and elites of south Delhi and shoppers of Sarojini, what is organic to the city of Delhi is its youth, who keep the city alive through their rough, rude, eccentric, and wild spirit. This is the bunch which relies on the sutta sessions of North Campus while standing up against the growing fascist regime of the country. Delhi, quite similar to Kolkata, is a hotbed of students’ politics, with strong voices from its premier educational institutes always coming together to deconstruct or preserve ideals. These wild spirits are marked by ambiguities of their youth years, which is always oscillating between rigid classroom lectures to open-air *adda* teachings on anything and everything while taking the police beatings with a strong heart. These are the years of shamelessly wearing the hearts on the sleeves and indulging in intellectual wanderings while waiting for the Godot of life who perhaps has lost GPS as he/she/they tried navigating the way through walled boundaries and the onus of creating a ‘bright future’.

Apart from RDB, it is **Dil Dosti Etc.** (2007) (henceforth referred to as DDE), which explores this ambiguity of college years in a typical Delhi-wallah environment. The widely underappreciated film, DDE places its story on the coming of age of Apurv, whose cynical and aimless nature is aptly complemented by the character of Sanjay Mishra, a student from Bihar with limited means. Set in the Delhi University, the film introduces characters who are encountered most commonly at every corner of the campus. While Sanjay carries with him the shades of Umar or a Kanhaiya, Apurv is the embodiment of the soul which



believes in infinite possibilities and every sexual liaison to be justified facilitated by intellectual stimulation sans the rat race of life. In both RDB and DDE, Delhi becomes synonymous to the youth and the free spirit that both these entities stand for. While other Bollywood films such as **Band Baaja Baaraat** (2010) (henceforth referred to as BBB) and **Raanjhanaa** (2013) also explored the campus life to an extent, DDE and RDB stand apart from the crowd for showcasing the perfect blend of the carefree spirit and budding sense of responsibility, along with the rigid while fluid shades of student politics. This amalgamation of diversity forms the cynosure of any Delhi institutional campus which becomes the breeding ground for ignited spirits from every corner of the country, who bring along with them their regional flavors of cognitive elements, thus conceiving ‘cosmopolitics’ in its truest sense. A Testament to the university culture, both these films successfully captures the existential angst of the postmodern times and the comfort that the campus offers to the anxious souls who would rather be a part of the university crowd than be obscure in the crowd of the world outside it (Ansari).

Trailing the political lanes, another film where Delhi emerges as the powerhouse of bloodthirsty politics, the capital city with the supreme authority, is the 2011 release **No One Killed Jessica** (henceforth referred to as NOKJ), based on the Jessica Lal murder case of 1999. Although severely criticized on multiple occasions, most notably by Daya Kishan Thussu for ‘Bollywoodizing’ the actual news, the image of India Gate from the film is still eerily haunting of the power politics that Delhi at the end of the stands for. The rich cynical Delhiwallah attitude characterized by the uber showcase of chauvinistic masculinist lingo of exclusively female-centric abuses, coupled with the rich spoilt wards of state politicians, Delhi, in NOKJ is

acutely different from the Delhi in BBB (for say). Similar to the fascist constructs of the contemporary time, Delhi of NOKJ takes the shape of this enormous evil which bears testimony to the crime committed in the scintillating nightlife, alluring to both the dreamers and criminals alike. At the same time, the ray of hope comes with the media intervention, which was instrumental in pushing the judiciary beyond the comfort of its chair and air-conditioned rooms. The film's ingenuity lies in very first few frames where newspaper iconography are used to frame particular landmarks and street scenes in the nation's capital, New Delhi (Khorana). There is a strange relationship that nationalism and democracy shares in this city obsessed with power, and one can witness varying levels of patriotic fervor and a sense of unity on occasions marked by diversified moods. The media crusade, spearheaded by Meera Gaitly, a fierce journalist in the film, against the prime accused and his father, is primarily facilitated by the India Gate vigil scene of RDB, utilized cleverly as a trope in NOKJ. It is the moment of epiphany for Meera regarding Lal's case as she realizes that the privileged act with impunity and she announces at the station the date and time of the protest group Middle Finger's plan for a protest at India Gate against the acquittal of the prime accused. The phrase, "*I will be there. Will you?*" resonates with the



thousands who are standing in the present time united against the fascist governance basing its ideals on fundamentalism and toxic masculinity. (Image 3)

In line with this, some of the locations of Delhi including Jantar Mantar and most importantly, India Gate, emerge as the symbol of Delhi's glorious past, the diplomacy of the bureaucracy, the emerging fascism and audacious saffronization of the nation, and the steadily rising unity in displaying resistance against such one-dimensional painting of the country marked by diversity. Although a little has changed since Lal's case, and it is still a long journey ahead, however, Delhi, through these places, thus stands not as the harbinger of only protests but the revolutionary spirit and hope for a changed world.

Like any other cultural industry, the film industry, too, tends to concentrate on particular cities. Mumbai, Copenhagen, New York, Paris, Delhi are some of the key names that have emerged time and again dominantly in the list of film clusters. This received a further push in the globalized era when Bollywood shifted its focus on urban spaces, especially to that of Delhi. The 21st century witnessed several Bollywood films centered on Delhi capturing various moods of not only the city but its dwellers. A city that sheds its shell almost daily, Delhi became the vox populi through many of these films. While both Bollywood and Delhi primarily represent Hindi-belt regions' attitudes and social behavior, which is predominantly heteronormative and (often) brutally thrashes any transgression, they have also managed to accommodate dissent in their own unique way by continual deconstruction for constructing anew. Films like **Delhi 6** (2009) gives a glimpse of Old Delhi – that part of Delhi which still breathes the air of the Mughal past while breaking their fast with Nihari gravy and Khamiri roti and sharing the daily chit-chats with the Marwari

neighbor. One of the lesser - known Delhi-based films is the 2014 release Titli, which, like NOKJ, reflects the criminal dog-eat-dog world of the scintillating city and also the apparent apathy that its denizens live their life with, which might be the breeding space for the heinous crimes and power struggle the city is otherwise usually known for. Other films like **Queen** (2014), **Vicky Donor** (2012), **Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!** (2008), **Do Dooni Chaar** (2010), **Rockstar** (2011) and **Delhi Belly** (2011) also stand for portraying Delhi in its truest spirit.

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Image 1

Monsoon Wedding, 2001 Dir: Mira Nair

Image 2

Rang De Basanti, 2006 Dir: Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra

Image 3

No One Killed Jessica, 2011 Dir: Raj Kumar Gupta

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# The Silence of the City Street

*Priyantha Fonseka*

A Path that Frustrates Life Expectations  
A FILM BY PRASANNA VITHANAGE

*Ira Madiyama*

AUGUST SUN

CHALCHITRA DARPARN  
URBAN SPACES 2019-2020

## Introduction

The expression of silence in the Sri Lankan art cinema present after 1990 takes multiplicity in form. Except for the characters that work for the expansion of the episode, the background settings contribute as a cinematic feature to deal with silence. In many films made after 1990, where the characters based on the city and the village contributes for the content of the film, many internal and external scopes make direct and indirect signs on silence. Nearly all these scopes, with the minimum use of sound that is music and dialogues and figurative use that is bright colours and substances filling the space joining with the episode suggested by the text and its background, contribute to the making of ideas generated by the ‘silent’ composition.

This paper reads the background scopes of the city spaces in Sri Lankan cinema by discussing two films produced in recent decades, namely Prasanna Vithanage’s ‘*August Sun*’ and Chinthana Dharmadasa and Udaya Siriwardena’s ‘*How I wonder what you are*’. The paper suggests that the transformation of the active, melodious, live city into the inactive, silent, inanimate one is not limited to the episode of the film but also has implications of socio cultural connections as well.

### **Silent City: As a space deprived of the hope for life**

In the popular cinema of Sri Lanka of the starting decades, the negative, ugly, uncultured, non-Sinhala Buddhist social space was depicted as the city as against the positive, beautiful, cultured, Sinhala Buddhist village that existed. The characters of the city including the complex city girl appeared for the characters witnessing that typical nature. Until the presence of the change of format brought about mainly by the creations of Dharmasena Pathiraja in the artistic cinema, direct readings on the city were seldom found. Since the film stream came with

this change of format decreased after the beginning of the decade of 1980, the city, seen and depicted with the inquiry of broad spatial system did not continue to take place .In short, it was not discussed that both the city and the village were zones of depiction for the existing spaces of social political and cultural spheres.

Even though we cannot argue that this minimum expression on the city in the creations of the stream of film has come to an increase, we can suggest that it has displaced itself to productions with re-statements on the city after 1980s. It does not increase because many films of this trend depict the village as the space of their episodes. We find a relatively lesser number of productions deviating from the village, identifying the city as the main space of their episodes. Among them we discuss here the two films Prasanna Vithanage's '*August Sun*' and Chinthana Dharmadasa and Udaya Dharmawardhana's '*How I wonder what you are*'. Dharmadasa and Dharmawardhana can be identified as the final links of the film tradition initiated by Vithanage and Handagama. Or else, they ended this film tradition to divert this film stream to a new direction.

Dharmadasa and Dharmawardhana station their camera in the city. The Sri Lankan city as in all other countries is truly the center where the political and economic power is concentrated. With the development of the transport system of Sri Lanka in the colonial period this was developed in to a better form marking Colombo as the capital and cities like Kandy, Galle, Jaffna, Anuradhapura as suburbs in the political map. The city spaces were made of shops, commercial centers, hotels, ports, institutions executing the state power, main schools, hospitals, libraries, main places of religious worship and museums. A significant theme common for all regions and especially for the South Asian region, 'going to the capital for prosperity' is

activated in the Sri Lankan context as well. Similarity with collapsed freeness identified as ‘complexity’ by the popular cinema in a nature of single form was absorbed to the city due to the fact that in the village the multicultural feature existed in a relatively higher level and the existence of much space to be accessed by the outside world.

However, vis-a-vis the pre-cinema age, the city that we encounter in the cinema wave arose after 1990s, unlike the village, does not communicate the awakened popular expectations about life. On the contrary, almost all of the films fail to support the expectations of the people who inhabit the city and to respond to their psychological breakdown. The discussion that follows examines the situation arising from the social and political dynamics determined by Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

### **Duminda's walk at the 'sacred' city street**

The expressed meanings of the city were displaced directly due to the political conflicts including the civil war and resurrections of the youth and indirectly due to the social and political factors created by the Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism. An anonymous writer in the journal *Race and Class* on the Black July 1983 in his article *Sri Lanka's week of shame: an eyewitness account*, expresses, thus.

*“Thousands gathered near the cemetery and began looting and burning in every direction. Within hours, Colombo was caught up in the worst holocaust it had ever experienced. Tamil shops and houses were singled out and looted and burnt, while many Tamils were murdered 500 in the first two days it was estimated. More than 500 cars and lorries were burnt and their wreckage left on the roads.”* ("Sri Lanka's Week of Shame: An Eyewitness Account" 39-50)

First, there is arson, murder and eviction and second, bomb blasts and highway robberies, and third, road blocks, check points and high security zones. The common urban space is obliterated from the common picture and the state, religious and commercial institutions that occupied such space take on another meaning, in another direction. It is this changed city traversed and inhabited and that forms the urban setting of most of the films. Visual artiste Chandraguptha Thenuwara observes as follows

*"For us living in Sri Lanka, it is visible how our living space is invaded with barrels. Barrels piled in thousands obstruct the circulation and mobility of the general public."*(Thenuwara)

'August Sun' is the foremost film in which this displaced city street is portrayed.

It is a multi-narrative film. In one of its narratives the main character Duminda is an army soldier. On his way to his village on leave, in Anuaradhapura he visits a brothel with his friends and finds among its sex-workers his sister Kamani as he enters the room with his chosen prostitute. He sees his sister walking out of a room with an old man. She gazes in stunned amazement at her brother for a few seconds and tries to get back to the room and close its door. But *Duminda* gives her several thundering slaps. The scene ends with the brothel managers pointing a pistol at his head and grievously hitting his face. *Duminda* does not meet his sister in Anuradhapura again. He only meets her again in his ancestral home when he goes to his village.

In the narrative connected to *Duminda*, it is during his search for his sister the following morning that he encounters the city street. The first view of the street in the background is of the gate to the brothel. It is not open from outside but is closed so as to conceal the goings-on inside the brothel. The gate of the

garment factory in the city that he sees later, on the other hand, is closed because its workers have lost their jobs. In the empty silent city street are posters on the walls of the workers demanding their lost jobs being eaten up by stray goats. It is not only the loss of life from the war and its horrors or the barrel laden security zones that form the city scene; there are other displacements of economic spaces in the city. The two locked gates come up as loud indicators of silence. They do not indicate a fulfillment of life expectations. They symbolize a moral collapse that accompanies an exclusive economic advance. It reveals the identity of a brother in search of the hidden turmoil of his sister.

As in the village, the urban space and its lost identity are turned towards a background space representing a character that transcends the internal monologue of silent characters. In '*August Sun*', the monument of the city street that we meet between the gates of the brothel and of the garment factory is silent but communicates a powerful message. It is the soldiers' monument bus stop. It is the city space where *Duminda* waits for a bus. There are no vehicles on the street except a tractor filled with coffins. In the city street, are images of death and of impermanence and economic instability.

There is no speech, no sound amidst these brief images that appear in the noonday Anuradhapura city space but they emphasize a background of the total uncertainty of life. The images are mostly distant and again the character *Duminda* is submerged within them, who with *Kamani* that we do not see again in the frame, portray their tragic condition.

"With the decade of the 80's the real situation of the public space in this regard is disturbing. When a baby is born a popular question among the Sinhala community is to ask if it is a sarong or a kambaya (cloth worn by a woman)? We raise this point



because that traditional question is now changed to “Is it army or garment?” signifying not sarcasm but distress.” (Senevi 271). The street in the noonday Anuradhapura scene is the path that shatters the life expectation of the “army and garment” son and daughter. In another scene there is the Samadhi statue. The hegemony of Sinhala Buddhism, in this case the holy city, is shown to crumble as an indirect result of it. The historicity, royalty, the odor of seela and symbols of the sangha embedded in the name “Anuradhapura” is subjected to gross revision in the holy city that is the setting of the film. (Senevi)

### **D's journey at the 'lavish' capital**

As the characters pass through in the space of the city streets it is not only '*August Sun*' that defines its silent background but also 'D', the main character in *How I wonder what you are* that reaches cinema audiences in 2009, also gets submerged in the urban space.

We meet 'D' in *How I wonder what you are* as a young man spending time unable to find a way out for the freeing of the empty solitariness in the mind with the body covered in sweat in a small apartment with loss of hope. He lives a silent life of monotony with only the sound of the live telecast of the television on the last few days of the civil war and the sound of the water bubbles of the oxygen tube in the fish tank. Suddenly, 'Cathy' comes to him—who is a friend of 'D'. She comes in search of 'D' because she had an argument with her lover 'KK' and suddenly leaves after staying for a few days in his home. Nothing happens. 'Cathy' and 'D' are in unexpressed bond with each other and the film ends with 'D' expecting and waiting for the return of 'D'.

In one scene 'D' gets on the pillion of a motorcycle of a stranger who promises to drop him at his lodgings. During the ride he

tells ‘D’ about his frustrated life expectations.

“People are too close. So they don’t feel each other. Like in a cow shed. That sea is like a fence. The life is so wretched that there is no freedom even to breathe. Don’t you feel how everything is getting stagnated?” (Dharmadasa and Dharmawardhana)

‘D’ riding in the pillion listening to all, maintains silence.

There are three main background spaces present in the film. The first is ‘D’s home. The second is the tavern. The third one is the streets of the city. When we come across the above statement, the bicycle carrying ‘D’ and the man, runs along one of these streets. What stations in the dark scene is only the single distant image of the old motor bicycle which seldom passes the light of the street lamps in the streets of the capital in the night. The man on the bicycle disappearing in the darkness taking leave from ‘D’ in an instant is never met again. The scene ends with a distant image showing ‘D’ vomiting at a corner after walking along the dark, silent, empty street. The street is empty and deserted with no people in it. No life is met there.

Even before and after this scene ‘D’ walks along the streets crowded with people and traffic. But, Dharmawardhana and Dharmadasa create all these scenes in such a way that life is not met in these streets. Earlier , the filmmakers who went for outer spaces of the village had a tendency to for the long frame but these directors show a tendency for using close-ups. Hence, other than the character these images do not sufficiently picture anything else. Fragments of life are met. Vehicles and parts of shops in the street seen in fragments.

“We focused camera to the bare truth of our lives. And cut them... then joined it back as we wanted.” (Ibid.)

According to this idea, the meeting streets in these centrally

close images are an expression of ‘true story’ of life. Accordingly, it is not meaningless to suggest that this represents the expression of moods of them and the characters brought for the said portrayal. What can be found in the said expression of moods.

“How I Wonder What You Are captures the eventual truth of a youth under the city lights. It frames an occurrence portraying the emptiness and the stillness of the life of a youth who’ve lost the taste of human bonds and doesn’t have a reason to live on.” (Ibid.)

The city streets constitute a communicative image of the hollow and static life that swallows up D and the people who associate with him. Just as Duminda is swallowed up micro elements of the urban space, D remains in the silent space of his urban background, which turns into a space that sums up all the silences of the characters.

## **Conclusion**

Victor Ivan defines briefly the horrible experiences that Sri Lankan society faced during the past several decades and destroyed its soul as follows:

“Insurrection, war and the Tsunami - both natural and man-made disasters - have taken away nearly 150,000 lives over the last 20 years. All these disasters did not kill all the people of the country but they have done harm to the human soul or killed people. Although we are alive, our souls have been destroyed or killed.” (Ivan).

It is reasonable to define the space of the city that we identified in this paper as refugee space occupied by characters whose souls have been killed by natural and man-made disasters. It is clear to the critical observer that although the tsunami was a natural disaster the other disasters were all determined by the

political direction and actions based on such direction in the country's independence era. Extremist Sinhala Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism (Sinhala Buddhist nationalism) suppressed other social discourse and divided society along racial, religious and caste considerations all of which resulted not only in extremism and marginalization, but also oppression which in turn led to the aforementioned crises and the closing up of social space for redemption from them.

For this reason although the geographical scene of the city that we have identified so far, changes they engender similar meanings as one unit. Whether the empty paddy field is the background to the village or the street is the background to the city, the crises faced by the characters are always based on definite facts. Merely because a background remains silent or static it is not possible to conclude that its effect on other areas and characters is not related to it.

Most of the characters in the art-house films which were made after the 1990s use silence as a powerful communication mode. Those characters engage in a struggle to defeat an unbeatable and huge machinery of symbolic state power, which threatens their identity or cultural milieu. The walled castle within which they shine their armoury is silence. First, silence is a safe space for them, like a protective shield. In silence, they find the necessary time to regroup and recollect their next courses of action. Therefore, it does not limit itself to a protective shield but also becomes a powerful weapon against the very perpetrators of their oppression.

The creator of *Forsaken Land* (2005) claims unequivocally that its environment plays the role of a character (Jayaratne). Such "environment character" comes out of its space in *Forsaken Land* (as well as from other similar films) and reappears in other films and in other rural and urban open spaces and thus

traverses from film to film as a character.

The characters that we met in this chapter provide space for the creation of a new concept. If the environment that swallows up all the characters like micro particles appears again as a character and if it traverses from one film to another, then the environment performs an internal psychological monologue and silence becomes a communication mode.

As we note that silence is capable of being the weapon of the weak, we are prompted to believe that silence is no longer the cinematic expression of a particular individual. Instead, the other spaces of the individual such as the village, a closed gate, bus-halt, an empty street also submerge in silence, implying the resistant expression of a community and its socio-cultural space.

This common expression of collective silence opens up new interesting areas of research for us. Depicting ‘silence’ as mis-en-scène is the foremost among them. Understanding the visual regime of silence is of interest to a researcher who wants to study the role of silence as a weapon.

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OXFORD

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CHALCHITRA DARPARN  
URBAN SPACES 2019-2020

Book Review

# Travels of Bollywood cinema:

*From  
Bombay to LA*

*From Bombay to LA*

By Anjali Gera Roy and Chua Beng Huat

Anjali Gera Roy and Chua Beng Huat in their edited volume ‘Travels of Bollywood cinema: From Bombay to LA’ attempt to unload the discursive role played by the notion of national cinema in the creation of a pan-Indian identity that is often a misnomer and a poor representation of the contested cultural background of Indian cinema. The collection of essays presented in the book brings together perspectives on Indian cinema from different geographies and disciplinary locations to re-conceptualise the understanding of national cinema. This is done through the examination of the meaning of nation, diaspora, home and identity in a cinematic context and the localities that are produced in the new global process by broadly addressing the dominant themes that have come to define filmmaking in the globalized world.

The theoretical backdrop is set by Bill Ashcrofts’s essay ‘Modernity, Globalization, Globality’ that contests unexacting theories of cultural homogenisation through the matrix of postcolonial theory. The author cites the examples of *Mother India* (1952) and *Om Shanti Om* (2007) to argue that resistance to cultural domination by the West occurs through the transformation of Western influences, through a process of hybridisation, to produce a ‘transformative cultural resistance’ and multiple ‘alternative modernities’ that multiplies itself in diverse ways. The movie *Om Shanti Om* is used as an example to elaborate the notion of constructing modernities- the reincarnation of Om, is depicted as an allegory of the cyclic continuation of Bollywood films, a form of self-referentiality. The movie plants itself strictly within the confines of Bollywood and its history. The inclusion of multiple stars within the ambit of the film assumes the presence of an audience with highly developed film literacy and serves as an extension of Bollywood’s production of an alternate modernity.

It further analyses modernity to be developing in a unique and internally referential way and validates the thesis that transformation of filmmaking technology has not led to a blind inculcation of Hollywood's narratives with a totally internally inconsistent form. Rather the alternative modernity created through this media is not just an alternative to the Western paradigm and instead serves as internally coherent, culturally situated and placed modernities that challenge the label of peripherality. Thus, this new modernity is a manifestation of how globalisation proceeds through a transformative and circulatory dynamic of local agency.

To imagine that the process of transformation of Western discourses in any way binds the transforming culture to the original is erroneous. The metamorphosis of Bollywood has resulted in the creation of a huge dynamic culturally situated form of medium that has been regarded as quintessentially modern. This assertion of individuality and agency of the 'subjected' is not something new. As far back as Mother India, Bollywood situated modernity locally and not as a borrowed alien conception. Today, modernity in Bollywood is continually challenged, re-shaped and re-invented. Movies like '*Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan*' (2020), '*Badhai Ho*' (2018) place homosexuality, sexuality of older couples and conventionally 'unfamiliar situations' like a late life pregnancy in a deeply Indian context and disengage with reductionist Western narratives to create a transformative local narrative. This reinvigorates what Ashcroft has termed as the concept of a 'transnation' or a nation that is deeply rooted in its past and yet crosses borders both physical and ideational.

The concept of cultural hybridisation and globalisationcalisation runs through Paranjape's demystification of the theory of unidirectional flow of cultural globalisation. He

cites ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ (2008) to fortify this argument while Madhuja Mukherjee examines the trope of travel, both literal and metaphorical within the new Bollywood film as well as cinematic travels to South Asian diasporic spaces by focusing on Yash Raj films particularly ‘Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge’ (1995). While the exhaustive study of transnational flows of Bollywood in a globalised world is enlightening and thoroughly researched, the section is often too quick to discount the disallowing role of the nation state in the creation of a subcontinental culture. Written in 2012, the authors probably did not anticipate the rise of intensely nationalist films in the contemporary era. Movies like *Parmanu: The Story of Pokhran* (2018) or *Uri* (2019) have a subliminal narrative of antagonisation and reassertion of national identity over the internationalism preached by globalisation. A re-ordering of transnational cultural flows is in order as globalisation faces increasing resistance in a supremely nationalist international paradigm.

As a witness to the artificial cultural division produced by the political Partition of 1947, the section on ‘Love across borders’ brought back the childhood nostalgia of watching Indian remakes of Bangladeshi films with my grandmother. Zakir Hossain Raju complicates this cross border flow to show how the deployment of religious difference to locate Bangladeshi movies in West Bengal has a distinct communal flavour. While this fractures the ideological structures that underlie Bengali cinema of the 1970s, Anuradha Ghosh in her essay revisits the possibility of a transnational parallel cinema movement through the social movements of the 1970s that provide fertile ground for a resistance aesthetic connecting alternative cinema practices in both the countries. Meanwhile Ishtiaq Ahmed studies the problem of using a national framework in

constituting a national cinema in the divided terrain of Punjab whose cultural unity is deposed by political divisions. Nicola Mooney re-imagines transnational Punjabi culture through the prism of diasporic Punjabi culture that revives their almost extinct vernacular through the movies of Harbhajan Mann.

The regionalization of the South Indian film industry is critiqued in the section ironically titled ‘The Other Film Industry’. The articles provide an incisive understanding of the new forms of sociality produced by Tamil cinema while M.K Raghavendra takes particular offence to the homogenisation of the Tamil, Telugu and Kannada film industry to fit the needs of a discursive nation state that produces a dichotomy between the North and the South. Meena T. Pillai reproduces the patrifocal nature of Malayali film that counters the construction of Indian modernity centred around the deification of the nation in the form of the ‘mother’. Malayalam cinema meanwhile continues to be preoccupied with the negative image of the stepmother, thus these examples are used to further prove the inconsistencies in the notion of a pan-Indian cinema. The heterogeneities are seen to be deep rooted and outweigh the homogenous tendencies. The resurgence of village India as opposed to Karan Johar’s ‘designer-NRI India’ has been used to fortify the new sociality and globality some sections of Bollywood is moving towards. A Foucauldian heterotopia is constructed to demonstrate how these two worlds are often posited against each other to further corroborate the divergent nature of Indian cinema.

This anthology reaches a crescendo in its final section to argue that while modern technologies have liberated Bollywood from specific geographies and aided its transnational mobility, it continues to contribute in the creation of a unique identity especially among diasporic populations. Manas Ray’s study on Fiji and Haseenah Ebrahim’s study on South Africa point to the

role played by pre-existing cultural connotations and divisions in the construction of this identity. The arguments reach finality in Kavita Karan and David Schaefer's ethnographic analysis. They suggest Indian cinema plays a greater role in internal segmentation along class, caste, gender or ethnicity within and outside the nation and this segmentation is utilised to profit through the polarisation of audiences. Thus, the internationalisation of films occurred to maximise box office collections and not necessarily to build a pan-Indian cosmopolitan identity.

Roy and Huat's collection is a commendable attempt to bring together different strands of thought pertaining to the construction of the nation in cinema. The essays construct a path dependency that evokes the limitations of national cinema. This book is a cogent opposition to the nationalist discourse pioneered by film scholars like Sumita S. Chakravarty, Madhava M. Prasad and Ravi S. Vasudevan. The debates over the representation of the nation state in cinema intensified in the 1990s with the bilingual film '*Roja*' (1992) inserting the region in the nation and interrogating the boundaries of the nation from the perspective of region, gender and religion. Thus, the hegemonization of Hindi culture and the lack of representation of diversity have been endemic to Bollywood cinema. Yet the flames of nationalist fervour that succeeded independence pivoted the industry towards the construction of the national, however discursive it may be. Yet today transnational travels and diverse subnational terrains expose the fault lines of this construction.

This anthology is an excellent guide to anyone attempting to study the discursive notion of national cinema and the role of the diasporic discourse in dismantling it. At the heart of the questioning initiated in this book is the role of complex

identities exhibited in the diaspora and the global yearning for a transnational hybrid culture. The vast majority of Indian audiences who are not included in the address of Bollywood or the meanings produced by them raises the question whether the nation is an apt category for examining cinema, because it excludes more than it includes. The authors almost unanimously advocate for an alternate transnational paradigm of cosmopolitanism and locality to study cinema. Yet, it is worth noting that the authors' inclination for the global tends to unfairly underplay the role played by nations in funding, imagining and popularising cinema. While the role of the nation may be discursive, it has a role that nonetheless might get overshadowed or trivialised in the transnational paradigm. Rather an authoritative account of the multiple imaginations of the nation outside of geographical boundaries within the cinematic universe is much in order.

In conclusion, Roy and Huat have excellently analysed the changing nature of cinema in the globalised world through the prism of nation, citizenship and identities. It is particularly relevant in the present era of hyper nationalism where the nation and its tropes have assumed an omnipotent existence. Contemporary films can be gauged critically if viewed through the paradigm presented by the scholars. The book is well annotated and forms a well-structured argument through its chapterisation and lucid essays. The questions raised by the editors in the introduction are satisfactorily addressed in the consequent essays and by the end of the book the reader is inclined to reconsider his or her predispositions about Indian cinema. For students interested in not only understanding films but also the socio-political complex which these films mirror, this book is an essential reading to comprehend the subliminal narratives about the nation every Indian movie engages with.

Travels of Bollywood cinema: From Bombay to LA  
by Anjali Gera Roy and Chua Beng Huat

"LYRICAL, LAYERED AND QUIETLY HORRIFYING."  
FILM COMPANION

Arundhati Chowdhury  
& Bala Panchanathan

CHALCHITRA DARPARN  
URBAN SPACES 2019-2020



# Urban Spaces & Anonymity in Aamis *(Ravening)*

Interview with Bhaskar Hazarika

SIGNUM PRODUCTIONS AND BHETANGOMAL PRESENT IN ASSOCIATION WITH WISHLERRY FILMS "AAMIS" STARRING LIMA DAS AND AROHADEEP RARUAH  
PRODUCTION DESIGN MANAS BARUA EDITOR SHWETA RAI CHAMLING CINEMATOGRAPHY RITU DAS MUSIC QUAN BAY COSTUME MEHEDI AHMED  
POSING & HAIR STYLING DEBARAT DAYAN, RUKMAJIT BARUAH SOUND DESIGN GAUTAM HAIL RE-RECORDING MILIK ALAYKUMAR PR SINGERIST MAHAK GUPTA  
CHIEF AD BHANASHYAM KALITA PRODUCTION CONTROL HIMAN BORA VFX RAJKESH MEHTA POSTER DESIGN TANAN SINGH BAKSHI, SAMRATA LENKA

Bhaskar Hazarika is Founder-Director at Metanormal Motion Pictures. He won the National Award as director for his first feature film, *Kothanodi* (Assamese). Hazarika, born and brought in Dergaon (a town in the Golaghat District of Assam) has come up with genre bending narratives that have caught the attention of acclaimed filmmakers and cinema enthusiasts around the world. When one watches Hazarika's movies, they will realise how it reflects the influence that a space like Dergaon or Guwahati has had on these stories.

Critically acclaimed, *Aamis* (*Ravening*) is Bhaskar Hazarika's second film. It revolves around the lives of Nirmali, a doctor in her late 30s and Sumon, a PhD student studying the food habits of Northeast India. Nirmali leads a peaceful but bland married life. She develops a unique bond with Sumon, who introduces her to a variety of fresh, wild meat-based delicacies. Although primarily set in Guwahati (the largest metropolis in Northeast India), the film's careful and nuanced use of spaces is one of the factors that add intensity to the story, making it tasteful to the viewers.



**How do you negotiate spaces in your films?**

I try not to use sets because I prefer shooting in real spaces and locations. It's very important for me because I tend to write stories that are oftentimes implausible. Hence, to make them plausible, I try to situate them in geographical spaces that are real and ordinary.

**It was apparent that a rural setting was necessary for Kothanodi, given that it is based on oral folklore of the predominantly rural, compiled by Lakhminath Bezbaruah. But why was an urban space like Guwahati chosen for Nirmali and Sumon's story? Why not cities like Dibrugarh or Delhi?**

There is not much difference between Dibrugarh, Guwahati or Delhi except for their size. Urban cultures across the nation, and indeed across the world, are pretty much the same in the 21st century. Guwahati is the largest city in the North East, and the anonymity such big cities offers, along with countless food joints and hang out spots, helped in setting up the plot of Aamis.

**How important was the urban setting for the film Aamis?**

Aamis is a very urban story. While the film is set in contemporary Guwahati, its story could have unfolded anywhere in the world. Sumon and Nirmali's love is facilitated by urban anonymity, access to public eateries, and instant messaging apps – just as stolen love is born in any other city. It is also our urban spaces where bizarre fantasies take root -Vorarephilia, for one, which involves fantasizing being ingested whole by one's lover.

**Alienation plays an important role in your film. In what way does the urban setting aid in portraying this?**

It's not so much alienation as anonymity. In a large city you are

usually just one dot in a sea of largely unconnected dots. Again, that helps in exploring the theme of a forbidden romance.

**We noticed that throughout the film, when Sumon explores the different meats with or without Nirmali - especially the exotic or unique ones, it never is in the city. Rather it is in the outskirts or so. This holds true even when he offers himself to Nirmali. Was this a deliberate attempt at recognising that urban can also be ridden with taboos?**

Not really. The urban is actually less ridden with taboos than the rural. What the urban lacks, and what the rural still retains, is a world view that is more primal and untouched by cosmopolitan hang ups; especially with regard to what acceptable food is and what is not.

**A gendered society is a subtle yet powerful feature that we observed in Aamis. There is a unique relationship between gender and access to spaces. How does this play in to your story? [Context: Would Nirmali ever have discovered/gone to those obscure restaurants had it not been for Sumon? In the last scene, although Nirmali is hungry for the meat, it is Sumon who goes hunting for it. So was it because of gender or love?]**

Nirmali is the kind of person who will not let gender stereotypes stop her from going somewhere or tasting something. She is an independent, intelligent woman. As she mentions to Sumon, what stops her from exploring all manner of food joints is her preference for hygiene - and that is a function of her job as a doctor, not so much her gender. It also stems from the stereotype in many urban minds about rural eateries - that hygiene and cleanliness are suspects in such places.

**Accountability in terms of action, reaction, and consequence is**

**essential to this film. Be it through the lens of infidelity, being averse to physical contact between friends or even the growing appetite for meat. In this context, how essential was the city setting to the idea of “repercussions” that is so integral to the film, especially towards its end?**

It was fairly important, given that news media - which became the main agent of their degradation in the climax - is far more active and vigilante in its approach to urban crime reporting. This is not to say that rural areas are not free of yellow journalism (as the 2010 film Peepli Live so quirkily showed) it's just that urban spaces attract it more.

**In terms of the stereotypes that are rendered towards the people of North-East, one of the most common among them is the “Jungle meat-eating type”. Was this a challenge for you in terms of not fanning the fire further?**

You have to understand here that Aamis is a creation of the pre-Covid19 world. In that world, I wanted to say that people should not be judged for what they eat and its time us North Eastern folk to stop being so apologetic about some of our dietary choices. No one should judge another for what one puts in their own stomach. However, in the post-Covid19 world, seeing how the Sars-Cov2 virus jumped from bats to pangolins to humans - it's best to be circumspect about what we eat in the interest of the larger common good. The larger issue that Sumon was trying to flag in the film is our heavy dependence on factory farmed meat. There is evidence to show this reliance on farmed meat is a significant contributor to global warming. So if you cannot procure locally available meat, perhaps it's better to go vegetarian rather than consume frozen factory produced meat. It's a struggle to do that if you live in a big city, and I wish something could be done about it.



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*Contributors*

**Anushka Maheshwary** is a third-year student of philosophy at St. Stephen's College. Her research interests include gender and epistemology, and queer theory.

Procrastinator most days, writer some nights. Over-thinker always, **Anushree Joshi** is a 19-year-old Literature student from Lady Shri Ram College, getting through second year by living on an unhealthy dose of Murdoch, movies, and iced tea. As the Editor of the student newspaper, DU Beat, she covers the politics of the University and its eccentricities. She writes for Terribly Tiny Tales and has worked on their short-film Suno in the promotional division. Her interests include American cinema and Brechtian theatre, when it comes to literature, but she relies on Bollywood to bring me home on sappy days of much-needed self-care.

**Saman Waheed** is a 2nd year student from Lady Shri Ram College for Women majoring in English Literature and minoring in Psychology. She has a keen interest in the Indian literature, particularly Indian Detective Fiction. Her interest also lies in the Indian cinema and she wrote her first paper on Bollywood movies itself. She loves to observe people and their day-to-day interactions. She hopes to educate people as much as she can, in whatever little ways possible and contribute towards the betterment of a society where human relationships are on a constant decline.

**Bhumika Singh** is currently pursuing BA (H) English from Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi. She is in her final year of graduation. She has secured the second prize along with the publication of an essay titled "The Catch in the Jar: A Millennial Analysis of The Bell Jar" in RGNUL Exagium: International Essay

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**Srija Sanyal** is Master's degree holder in English Literature from the University of Delhi. She is currently pursuing her research as an independent scholar, while pursuing her second Masters in English Literature with specialization in Indian Folk Studies and Comparative Literature from IGNOU, and working as Senior Business Editor in a market research firm. She has published research works in various national and international journals, along with presenting her paper in multiple prestigious seminars. She aims to pursue PhD in the long run with a focus on gender and its representation in Indian cinema, along with the role of language in constructing, asserting, and deconstructing power structures in the postcolonial context.

**Priyantha Fonseka**, is an influential film critic and a scholar who currently works as a Senior Lecturer at the Dept. of Fine Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. He completed his graduate studies at University of Sydney in 2015 and his thesis titled "Silence in Sri Lankan Cinema from 1990- 2010" was highly admired and is a prominent scholarly work in that manner. He served many universities in the country as a lecturer of film studies more than 17 years. He also works as a visiting lecturer at University of Colombo, Sri Lanka and served as a jury member in the Jaffna International Film Festival as well as some other national film and television festivals. Priyantha is an author, poet, translator, blogger and an active member of current cinematic dialogue of the country.

**Suhasini** studies Political Science at Miranda House. Her research interest includes political theory, comparative democracy, contemporary Indian politics and cultural studies from an interdisciplinary perspective. An avid consumer of the visual media, Suhasini has a keen interest in studying the socio-political impact of cinema on the larger political processes in the world.

**Bala Panchanathan** is a final year honours student of Political Science in Miranda House. Apart from being passionate about environmental issues, she also loves cats and cinema. She appreciates obscure, arthouse films, but also has a soft spot for mushy rom-coms.

**Arundhati Chowdhury** is a final year honours student of Geography in Miranda House. An enthusiast who appreciates art and all things alike, she believes in the power of words, stories, and storytellers. She has an affinity for cakes, maps, and films.

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