

## **M.A. English; Semester II; Course CC5 (Film and Literature)**

### **Text-Film Interface in Amu**

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Stories have always been an inalienable part of every human culture; they help us to make sense of our thoughts and actions, individually and as community and enables understanding of our significance in the world that we inhabit. This is a reading of Amu in an attempt to try and explore the verbal and visual structure, mediating between film and the novel, to gain an understanding of the representations of the erosion of pluralism, otherisation, naming of the enemy, state complicity, individual acquiescence, violence and its consequences. Amitav Ghosh's 'The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi' records his experiences of that fateful day of the Indian Prime Minister's assassination and the sheer magnitude of unimaginable inhumanity that unfolded with its often strategic, often amnesiac recordings in history on the one hand and the raw wounds of memory on the other. In his writing, Ghosh quotes the Bosnian writer Dzevad Karahasan's essay entitled 'Literature and War' that mediates literary aestheticism and the contemporary world's indifference to violence: 'The decision to perceive literally everything as artistic phenomenon-completely sidestepping questions about goodness and truth-is an artistic decision. That decision started in the realm of art, and went on to become characteristic of the contemporary world' However Ghosh's troubled mind interrogates whether authors could genuinely 'find a style, or a voice or a plot that could accommodate both violence and a civilized willed response to it'? Ghosh responded by scripting The Shadow Lines while Shonali Bose recognized the urgency of remembering unwritten stories by making and writing Amu.

The brutalities the Orwellian apocalypse of 1984 is a story of unlearnt lessons from history. While nothing of consequence happened elsewhere in the world, 1984 fulfilled its apocalyptic portents most devastatingly in India. The list includes separatist violence in Punjab and Operation Blue Star, the Bhopal Gas tragedy, and before that, the assassination of Indira Gandhi followed by brutal pogroms against a hapless Sikh community. In New Delhi, India's capital,

more than five thousand Sikhs were murdered in a deadly systematic carnage. Tens of thousands were injured, and many more families were torn apart or dislocated. Had it not been for the citizens of Delhi, the Nagrik Ekta Manch and the Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee rising up in defense of their neighbors, many more people would have been massacred. Within weeks, independent inquiry commissions courageously compiled extensive reports documenting both the organized nature of the carnage and the role of the officialdom, even as the police and officials refused to register or investigate complaints from the victims and witnesses.

In contrast with the governmental efforts, a number of individuals, groups and activists have continued with their initiatives over the years – providing relief and rehabilitation to the victims, fighting legal battles, holding independent inquiries and demonstrations, documenting the events in books and booklets. Largely due to their efforts, the infamy of 1984 could not be inured into silence.

From 31 October 1984 to 10 November 1984, human rights groups PUDR ( People's Union for Democratic Rights) and PUCL (People's Union for Civil Liberties) conducted an inquiry into the pogroms by interviewing those affected by the pogroms, neighbors of the victims, police officers, army personnel and political leaders. In their joint report, entitled *Who Are The Guilty?*, they concluded:

*'The attacks on members of the Sikh community in Delhi and its suburbs during the period, far from being a spontaneous expression of "madness" and of popular "grief and anger" at Mrs. Gandhi's assassination as made out to be by the authorities, were the outcome of a well organised plan marked by acts of both deliberate commissions and omissions by important politicians of the Congress (I) at the top and by authorities in the administration.'* (Introduction)

In 2009 The Delhi High Court, while pronouncing its verdict on pogrom-related cases, stated:

*'Though we boast of being the world's largest democracy and the Delhi being its national capital, the sheer mention of the incidents of 1984 anti-Sikh riots in general and the role played by Delhi Police and state machinery in particular makes our heads hang in shame in the eyes of the world polity.'* (Indian Express 23Aug 2009).

On November 1, 1984, morning, Khushwant Singh had been told by friends to be careful, as he could be the target of a mob attack, as he had returned the Padma Bhushan awarded to him, in protest against Operation Bluestar. When riot- victims' lawyer, H S Phoolka, questioned Singh whether he tried to contact the police for help, he replied, 'After I saw what the police were doing, I thought it pointless to ask for police help.' Deposing before the Nanavati Commission, Singh told the commission that the police were mute onlookers:

*'On October 31, 1984, I came out of my house, near Ambassador Hotel and from the gate near the road; I saw a mob burning a taxi, belonging to a Sikh. From a distance of 10 yards, I saw around 30 policemen, an inspector, who was armed and a sub-inspector, standing across the road. The policemen did nothing to prevent the mob from burning the taxi,'*

Fundamentally, the act of genocide embodies a human being's willingness to destroy an entire segment of the human population. The potential for this is present in all societies. Given the right circumstances, the ability to commit genocide is easily converted into an act of genocide. As such, genocide is a collective enterprise: it involves collective thought, followed by collective deeds. The more a group defines its identity in narrow terms, the more it is likely – under pressure – to consider an annihilationist mode of behavior. (Huttenbach [www.massviolence.org](http://www.massviolence.org))

The writing of Amu was born out of this apocalyptic year of history's mortification. The courage of the writer/filmmaker Shonali Bose whose unflinching resilience led to the telling of a buried story won a National Award in India and gained worldwide recognition. When she made the film, the Censor Board gave it an 'A' certificate. The reason offered was that young people had best not know a history that is better buried and forgotten.

At a pre-screening of Amu, Shyam Benegal spoke of Amu as 'being intelligently crafted, and well-researched. Konkana Sensharma does a great job as Kaju/Amu. You get to see two active women politicians Brinda Karat as Keya Roy and Subhasini Ali as Lalitha Ramalingam showing off their acting skills. And most importantly, Shonali Bose, the director, holds the whole movie together with a very evident and immense amount of conviction. She needs to be commended solidly for that'.

The fabula of *Amu* is about a twenty-one year graduate from a college in UCLA. She has a Bengali name Kajori Roy, Kaju for short. Her adoptive mother, Keya Roy is a single parent and civil rights activist in Los Angeles. Kaju flies down from Los Angeles to visit her relatives, that is, Keya's family and to discover her personal history. She had been told that her birth parents were from a nearby village called Chandan Hola and that they had died as a result of a malaria epidemic that resulted in her adoption. In reality however, she had been orphaned in the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. Upon her arrival, Kaju is warmly welcomed by her maternal uncle and repository of Bengali culture Dilip Roy, aunt Mishti Roy, her placental Dida Bina Roy and Tuki, her cousin and daughter of Dilip and Mishti, with whom she shares confidences .

Penguin India requested Shonali Bose to convert the *Amu* screenplay into a novel which she did while she was editing the film. *Amu* the film and *Amu* the novel released simultaneously in India on January 7, 2005 making her the first Indian to have a simultaneous release of a film and a book. But the openings are different. The book opens with an expository chapter entitled *Lonely Planet* located in L.A. The start of the film on the other hand corresponds to Chapter Two of the novel with Kaju seated in a once ubiquitous Ambassador, video camera in hand, fascinated in a childlike way of everything on sensory offer: innumerable monuments, a colourful election campaign-wagon and her adoptive family. There is also a reflective thought of why her mother tried to discourage her visit and an instinctual attraction to the sounds of Gurbani in a gurdwara. This sequence is contained between credits in white letters against a stark black background. On a trip to Chandan Hola, she is strangely drawn to the village scene, sitting at the village pond gazing at life in rural India. She looks through her video camera 'trying to capture the little visual vignettes around her. Maybe, as she recorded, they would become her memory.' But memory eludes recognition. The video camera becomes an extension of Kaju, a filter of identity, trying to resolve the gap between subject and setting, and to do so, she had to belong to the frame, not stand on the outside, watching, shooting sequences.

Cajoled into attending a party by her cousin Tuki, Kaju meets Kabir a Stephanian from a privileged background who derides her large-eyed wonder at discovering the 'real India', an intertextual reference to Adela Quested's desire in Forster's *A Passage to India*. She visits the University enclave. In the book, her city trip takes her to Miranda House, the college where her mother taught and meets Lalitha Ramalingam and other colleagues in the Department of History

before finding her way to Balbir's dhaba, run by Govind. The film edits this location to connect with the dhaba scene where coincidentally, she comes across Kabir and his friends. An invitation to visit Govind's home marks the start of a journey of discovery through slums and subaltern accounts that reconstructs her life and the silences of history. Her search intensifies with the help of Kabir, who shares her cause once he learns of her adoption and her humble beginnings. At a lavish lunch at Kabir's opulent home, she learns from his father, Arun Sehgal, a civil servant, that the story of the malaria epidemic was untrue and beneath the deception lay a political minefield of inflicted wounds and subterfuge. A trip to Govind's chacha in the slums through the railway tracks affirms a curious feeling of déjà vu. These scenes are constructed brilliantly as they explore Kaju's mind struggling with some connectedness with her past. One sequence with excellent sound effects in particular arrests attention. After all the supervising sound editor is Rasool Pookutty who later won an Oscar for *Slumdog Millionaire*. As the group comprising Govind and his family along with Kabir and Kaju prepare to cross the railway tracks, Kaju strays behind and a train crosses. With the passing of bogies, Kaju seems to spot a woman in profile, a projection of a diffused remembrance that is erased as soon as the train crosses.

Meanwhile her mother Keya Roy arrives unannounced in Delhi to a loving family welcome and is shocked to discover that Kaju has been visiting the slums. Slowly the jigsaw of her origins starts to fall into place and thus begins the conflict between mother and daughter. The gap between Kaju's questions and Keya's subterfuges motivated by parental protectiveness is ample indication of the eclipse of truth. Kaju confronts her mother:

*'Mom, after everything you've taught me, everything you've ever stood for, since when is hiding the truth the right thing to do?'* (88)

A few days later, Kaju spots her mother's old trunk of her days in Miranda House and decides to rummage through its contents by dramatically breaking the lock. In it she discovers a death certificate that establishes the date and place of death of a woman whose name was smudged. There were four decipherable letters in the first name 'SHAN' and the last name started with 'K' and ended in 'R' which produced innumerable possibilities. Confronted with this discovery, Keya struggles with herself to justify her own concealment as an act of protection and the moral imperative that she owes to her daughter.

As Kaju and Kabir undertake an intense journey in search of truth, they discover their respective families' involvement in different ways with a man-made tragedy of immense proportions. With the help of Govind, they come across a man called Kishan Kumar who was involved in the violence at Trilokenagar during the carnage. Govind recognizes him as the man who brutally dragged and burnt Balbir Singh, their neighbour and dhaba owner. Individual genocidal intent is difficult to establish in the face of the anonymous forces such as the political establishment, bureaucracy the police which may be encouraged by active collaboration or paralysis of complicity. In 1984, it was both.

Questioned by Kabir on 1984, KK redirects the moral responsibility to those who instigated the smaller players of violence and provided material support for the genocide, a repetition of the culpability of 'police, officers, sarkar, neta' by the women victims of violence in the resettlement colony of Tilak Vihar. Very significantly, these widows of genocide are able to articulate the criminal complicity of the state and its justice system with passionate clarity rather than seek extenuation on account of lack of will or inefficiency to restore order: *'When decisions needed to me made, they were made. When it was time to act efficiently, the State did so. After all two murderers from November 1984 did get their due: the killers of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.'* (105)

. In his book *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen argues that *'a great many persons' identities ...seemed to give way- quite suddenly-to sectarian identification with Hindu, Muslim or Sikh communities. The carnage that followed had much to do with elementary herd behavior by which people were made to "discover" their newly detected belligerent identities.'*

A strange collocation of facts curiously indicated that Kishan Kumar could be Kaju's birth father. With mortification, Kaju tries to come to terms with being the daughter of such a heartless criminal as Kishan Kumar and decides to meet him at his auto-stand in the slums at about the same time of the Bongo Sammelan programme. Her absence leads to Keya following Kaju and the cathartic unravelling of truth. At the climax mother and daughter sit in the Ambassador car in pouring rain while the entire bloody past is recreated in a flashback. Kaju finally learns the truth from her Keya that her real name is Amu and she was born into a Sikh family Gurbachan Singh and Shanno Kaur and that she had a younger brother, Arjun. She discovers that her father and

brother were brutally murdered during the Delhi riots of 1984 while her mother frantically appealed for justice ironically to the perpetrators of brutality. Those were Amu's fleeting memories analeptically picturised. Her trauma led to her eventual suicide on the birthday of her son. Shanno was very close to Keya who along with citizens provided succor to genocide victims in relief camps. More terrifying than the violence is the inability of victims to be heard especially when they have a story to tell: that the protectors turned perpetrators and later, these were the very people who distributed relief materials in camps. Shanno left a letter for Keya in which she requested her to take care of Amu and give her a future that would erase the memories of the past. Keya gave up Miranda House, Neil, her family in India and became a full time single mother to the three-year old in Los Angeles whom she named Kaju. At a personal level, she was deeply anxious about how Kaju would accept the truth and how it might impact their very special relationship. The sequences of violence are dealt with remarkable skill of ascetic restraint but the wounds speak more than what is visualized. At the close of the film and the book Kaju and Kabir are at the railway tracks at Trilokenagar with Kaju wearing a steel bangle adding the missing mark of filiation to her subjectivity. A blue train trundles by and a red kite soars in the sky in an uneven dance. Finally she becomes a part of the frame she had come to shoot in India. But before they walk away, the radio in the book and television in the film announces the unfolding events at Godhra. History had once again opened up its cunning corridors to revisit the past.

At the site of communal politics which can unleash terrible violence and lasting wounds, lie the notions of cultural essentialism, miniaturization of identity, and construction of otherness. Culture is not a homogenized physical entity. Cultures flow, intermingle and intersect within and across societies. An essentialist view of culture on the other hand leads to rigid binaries of characteristics that credits the self and constructs the disparaged other. In our ordinary business of living, subjectivities are formed through plural affiliations, each of which, within social contexts has short-lived and contingent existence. The manipulations to ignore affiliations other than those emanating from one restrictive identity is deeply divisive and also contribute to drawing shadow lines of imagined difference and contributes to social tensions and violence. The art of constructing hatred, says Sen *'takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns other affiliations, and in a conveniently bellicose form can also overpower any human sympathy or natural kindness that we may normally have. The result can be homespun elemental violence.'*

The wounds of violence are often inured into the silences of history or occasionally script themselves as innocuous footnotes. Sometimes narratives in different media unearth them to ensure that history is not grabbed by its own insanity. Beyond the scholarship and pedagogy, these lessons need to be learnt.