

The Genesis of Hussain's Gaja Gamini: From Paintings to Screen

Prof. Preeti Oza

Cinema owes much to painting in both content and style. But films, while often influenced by great works of art, are more than just moving paintings. Films have often taken painters and painting as their subjects, and the difficulty that inevitably dogs these attempts is the problem of presentation. It is difficult to "show" an artist painting without boring your audience to death. The creative process that underlies painting is impossible to demonstrate in a film. One solution is to focus not on the artist and his work but on the social and personal conditions around him. Another approach is to divorce the cinematic narrative from the facts of the painter's life, work and social context to construct a new, particularly cinematic examination of all three. Many painters have applied the first approach to make their body of work more versatile and to reach to a larger audience.

M.F. Husain the filmmaker was a natural extension of M.F. Husain the artist. Husain's films not only explored the exquisiteness of the female form, much like his paintings, but also looked deeply, almost reverentially, into the mind and moods of a woman. So when he turned filmmaker with *Through the Eyes of a Painter* as far back as 1967, Husain merely traded canvas for celluloid.

Although it was with *Gaja Gamini* starring Madhuri Dixit that Husain made a lasting impression as a filmmaker, the auteur in the "besotted" Bollywood fan came to the fore in *Through the Eyes of a Painter*, commissioned by the Film Division of India. Just 15 minutes long and without a single dialogue, the film set in Rajasthan was a series of beautiful montages, earning Husain The Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival.

M.F. Hussain's journey from a bill board painter to a celebrated painter is well known but his obsession with 'woman' in all creative aspects has not yet been fully explored. His film, based on his series of paintings "Gajgamini", is his attempt as an artist to transcend the layers of medium

to capture the essence of womanhood. “It is an experimental film being made on an international level and standards. It’s a woman’s journey through mythology and history”. The philosophical, literary and religious aspects are dealt with by Hussain in his unique style - highly aesthetic and artistic. You can say it is a celebration of womanhood. It is a uniquely different kind of experience for everybody associated with this project. It is designed for the international market.

To call Maqbool Fida Husain’s ‘Gaja Gamini’ a mere film would be like belittling all that the man’s talent typifies and personifies. For ‘Gaja Gamini’ is more than a tribute to a woman — it is eons of time, all rolled into one. In a film that has no story, no hero, no heroine and certainly no plot, you find everything — the actors, the stage, the plot, the art and the form. ‘Gaja Gamini’ is the story of a woman — all that she has been to man through time. The mother, the beauty, the tease, the coquette, the oppressed, the intellectual, the strong, the powerful, the muse... all these faces have been portrayed in a state of timelessness, in a film that has two sections on screen, separated by a black wall.

One is Gyan (represented by Kalidas) and the other is Vigyan (represented by a scientist). It is ironic how the two strongest faces of truth (science and literature) keep bumping into each other at odd times — on the ghats of the Benares Ganga, in a jungle of modernity and in the forests where there are strange, leafless bamboo trees, storms, and where the scents of seduction prevail — and find themselves reacquainting anew, with new wisdoms to impart.

The film, *per se*, has no beginning, no middle and no end.

For those better informed, hark back to a film called ‘Insignificance’, where Marilyn Monroe, her ex-husband, Joe DiMaggio, Albert Einstein and Senator Joe McCarthy all meet in a sweaty hotel room in 1953. In one bizarre occurrence, Monroe uses toys to explain the theory of relativity to Einstein, and McCarthy has a most unsatisfactory sexual experience with a Monroe impersonator. And you are wondering what on earth is going on anyway!

Similarly, ‘Gaja Gamini’ is like a series of miniature tablets of life that keep intersecting and interconnecting at all the stages of life that we have known and read about. Strongly rooted in the principles of Hindutva, ‘Gaja Gamini’ is the mast that holds all of life aloft — the elusive walk of the woman, an enchantress, a mystical figure, who has no face, just various avatars. And all the avatars — Mona Lisa, the muse; Shakuntala, the inspiration; Sangeeta, the enchantress; Munshi Premchand’s Nirmala; the rich, but oppressed, Monika; the friend who sees nothing but knows all; Sindhu, the firebrand who is only engaged in destroying evil; Phulwani, the lady who sells flowers, but nurses a gun beneath the blossoms — all strike a chord of deep empathy in the heart of the intelligent viewer. The film has all ‘the beauty of the canvas that Husain has painted excellent dances by Madhuri Dixit in every avatar, and the sheer beauty of direction. However, viewers came out with not very satisfied looks as they could not understand the inherent symbolism of the film.

“A couple of years ago, when I was in hospital, I thought of making a film on Madhuri Dixit. I have been painting her in different ways, trying to depict her as the essence of Indian womanhood and of the many manifestations of womanhood. So, rather than painting her, I thought let me try doing the same thing in some other medium. I wrote a few lines here and there, and then I started with a visual script, which is about 80 feet long. It is like a film strip. There I did the important sequences, painting them one by one.

That was the basis of how I visualised the film. I then started writing the script, that is, just the story line. But first I fixed two or three metaphors as I had done in my 1967 film, *Through The Eyes Of A Painter*, where a lantern, a lamp, a cow and a shoe were the inanimate objects that I showed throughout the film — just music and those images. And I tried to put in those objects feelings and emotions. I didn’t show the shoe being worn by any person, but just as an object, as form.

The theme that I now wanted was woman as form, as an icon. So I fixed this metaphor. My mother died when I was a year old. I had never seen

her face. That gave me an idea. I call it, '*Andurpur ki ek aurat, sar pe gatri, gode me bachcha, aur paun me ghungroo.*' (A woman from Andurpur, with a bundle on her head, a child in her lap and *ghungroos* on her feet). And then she walks through space and time."

There is a story, but it is not a linear story — it moves back and forth, in time and space — and Gamini is the link. She plays several roles, which are reflections or manifestations of womanhood. There are several episodes. One is in Benares, where some authors like Premchand and Nirmala, as also two or three other characters meet and talk of their own experiences. The lover, Kamdeo, comes down and changes into different forms and we follow them. He becomes a lawyer, a nawab and so on.

There are five women in this film — like our legendary Panchkanya — who shake up the equanimity of the heavenly Gods. Gamini is the metaphor of a woman who is *shakti* and she passes through five different stages without facing the camera, and nobody knows who she is. This film combines almost all Hussain's experiences in painting. This is an accumulation of all those experiences in this film.

He further says:

The power of woman and her identity is the message of my film. I portray the individuality of a woman, the way she is passing through time and space on her own terms. The essence of Indian culture is *shakti*, the woman. That is what I am going to reflect in my film. Without really raising any issue. It is a purely poetic statement, the body language of a woman.

This is in line with what Satyajit Ray had said:

It is very easy to make a commercial film, and it is very easy to make an art film. But the most difficult thing to do is to make a sensible, popular film. I am working on that because this is the medium with which we should communicate.

To go back to what Husain says:

You cannot go and talk to a tree. But a tree has its own language. How it is raised, where it is and how it related to the point. It is

purely a form, a structure. It is a structure of different forms. So, in that way, I built a whole film. Everybody at that time laughed at me saying it was nonsense. When I showed that shoe or the lantern, I wasn't using it as a symbol of light or of education or anything. I used the shoe as form — totally out of the context. You look at a shoe as a shoe and not because you want to wear it or see what it is made of.

This is what a visual experience is. Because what we see normally, people don't see. Because their minds have been conditioned by what they know about this thing. If they see that thing, they will notice it. Otherwise they just ignore it. The role of the artist is to make people aware of what form is, just as musicians make you aware of what sound is. It was the pure structure of imagery and I used no dialogue. I just used music. There was no purpose but the pure visual experience. I was not telling a story.

Husain did not wield the director's baton for the next 33 years. In 2000, he cast his muse Madhuri (he admitted to becoming a fan of the actress after watching her 1994 family drama *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*) in 'Gaja Gamini'. A metaphor for the journey of a woman called Gaja Gamini suspended in time and space along with a spectrum of characters taken from art, history, music and poetry, Husain mounted his film like a painting.

"Every scene of 'Gaja Gamini' turned out the way he had envisaged it, beauty in its purest form," says filmmaker-cinematographer Santosh Sivan, who worked with Husain in 'Gaja Gamini'.

Husain made sure that almost every frame was a showcase for Madhuri — she was Noorbibi, a symbol of stability; Shakuntala, the princess conceived in the poetry of Kalidasa; Monica, the boat woman searching for love; Phoolwania, the flower girl mourning her slain husband; and even Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa.

Works Cited:

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- * Prof. Preeti Oza is Assistant Professor at St. Andrew's College, Department of English.