

Paving the Path through Contestation and Conviction: A Perspective on *Garam*

Hawa

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Abstract:

M. S. Sathyu's 1973 directorial debut *Garam Hawa* deals with the memories of aftermath of India's Partition from the perspective of those Muslims who dared not to redefine their concept of "home" and stayed in their professed homeland exhibiting great amount of perseverance and hope and also faith in the pluralistic tradition of their country and its people. My paper will examine the relevance of the film and its message in the current Indian scenario.

Garam Hawa effectively exposes bigotry—both political and religious; in the face of great humanitarian crisis triggered by Partition. The film calls for tolerance and assimilation as not the only solutions for Salim Mirza the main protagonist; but for contestation, conviction and the need and urgency to raise your voice against injustices and intolerance.

Keywords: Partition, Dislocation, Pluralism, Bigotry, Contestation

Introduction

"The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity."

-- from "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats

In the current scenario of heightened passions what is required is to sit back and reflect and take lessons from not so distant past, which brings to our collective memory scenes of violence, rapes and bloodshed on an unprecedented scale witnessed by the subcontinent. A film that takes this issue head-on and with great sensitivity is M. S. Sathyu's 1973 directorial debut *Garam Hawa*. The partition of India left in the collective memory of the people of the subcontinent the "scars of history" (Zakes Mda 2000:12) which are not allowed to be healed by the narrative of hatred propagated by politicians and bigots in the garb of religion, race, caste and gender prejudices which constantly flare the hatred,

pain, agony and anguish further intensifying the already existing gulf between different groups and communities. Priya Kumar in her book *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film* writes that:

“The divisive legacies of that moment of truncation, violence, dislocation, and suffering are crucial to understanding contemporary religio-nationalist conflict in subcontinent. I view Partition as a spectral presence that continues to inform and haunt both Hindu-Muslim relations in India and contemporary international relations in the subcontinent.” (Priya Kumar 2008: 85)

Priya Kumar uses the trope of Holocaust in order to revisit the trauma of partition caused by mass dislocation, violence, murders and rapes in a moment of mass insanity which turned humans into monsters. In spite of the scale and magnitude of the trauma faced by millions Kumar writes that very little scholarship is available on this “national trauma” but “Since the mid-1980’s, however, there has been a proliferation of retrospective historical, journalistic, autobiographical, ethnographic, and imaginative materials that attempt to address Partition from the present historical conjuncture.” (89-90) She further urges that this re-visitation of the partition narrative should “be read in terms of the politics of the present” (90).

Sathyu’s *Garam Hawa* which is inspired by Ismat Chughtai’s unpublished short story is a film much ahead of its times not only in its concerns but also in the treatment of its theme about the truncated existence of Muslim populace who stayed back in their homeland even in the face of difficulties, alienation, economic crisis even when their near and dear ones moved to Pakistan nurturing dreams and aspirations about the new homeland. Reflecting on the communal violence that happened due to the partition and the dislocation of people that ensued tearing apart human relations; Ismat Chughtai writes in her essay “Fasaadat aur Adab” (Communal Violence and Literature):

The flood of communal violence came and went with all its evils, but it left a pile of living, dead, and gasping corpses in its wake. It wasn’t only that the country was split in two – bodies and minds were also divided. Moral beliefs were tossed aside and humanity was in shreds.... Families were torn apart. One brother was allotted to Hindustan, the other to Pakistan; the mother was in Hindustan, her offspring were in Pakistan; the husband was in Hindustan, his wife was in Pakistan. The bonds of human relationship were in tatters, and in the end many souls remained behind in Hindustan while their bodies started off for Pakistan. (Ismat Chughtai 2015: 3)

It is this falling apart of bonds and relationships in the aftermath of Partition that the film *Garam Hawa* touches upon. The very beginning of the film artistically captures the tragic assassination of Mahatma

Gandhi with three gunshots preceded by scenes of mass dislocation and displacement caused by Partition. Gandhi's assassination foreboded the end of an era which symbolized universal brotherhood and pluralistic tradition, with his death the country came to witness worst communal riots which shattered the very ideals for which Gandhiji stood for till his last breath. Set in the historic city of Agra the film not only artistically captures the ethereal beauty of Taj Mahal with the river Yamuna flowing in the background, it also arrests the various sights and sounds of the city as it etches the life of middle-class Muslim family facing the vagaries of time as they find themselves being seen as the "other" in the changed political and social scenario of the country. Urvashi Butalia rightly observes in her book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*:

These aspects of Partition --- how families were divided, how friendships endured across borders, how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives, and indeed the cities and towns and villages they settled in --- find little reflection in written history. (Urvashi Butalia 1998: 9)

Representation of Truncated Existence of Indian Muslims in Post Partition Scenario

Massive displacement of people led to construction of new identities even those who remained in India were constantly put to test and their identities re-negotiated. The creation of Pakistan created a constant threat to the identity of Indian Muslims as time and again they are ascribed to Pakistan and any opinion or dissent is perceived as a mark of disloyalty towards the nation. Salim Mirza the central protagonist navigates through this changed reality that he finds himself in and tries to re-construct his identity of an Indian Muslim. Life is particularly difficult for Salim Mirza and his family as he finds himself isolated and alienated from both sides --- his own countrymen now look at him with suspicion and his relatives leave him stranded as they move on to Pakistan; gradually severing all ties of kinship with him. He stands like a tree whose branches have got broken in the stormy weather; but the tree itself is standing tall bracing rough winds in the long dark night; clutching on the hope of a cloudless sunny morning. Salim Mirza holds on to the pluralistic tradition of his country and is hopeful that Gandhiji's sacrifice for the nation will not go waste and life will soon be back to normal for the nation and its people. It is only with the passage of time that Salim Mirza realizes that life is not the same in the post Partition scenario. The film begins and is dominated by scenes where Salim Mirza is shown bidding good bye to his near and dear ones at the railway station who have embarked upon their historic journeys into the newly created nation which will eventually change their identity from being

an Indian to a Pakistani. While writing about railway station scene Kavita Daiya in her book *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India* observes:

The Train station scene recurs multiple times throughout the film, each scene marking the reiterative, ongoing fragmentation of Indian Muslim families as its members give up hope of being able to live in an unprejudiced society and leave: After his sister and her children, Salim bids goodbye to his elder brother Halim and his family, and finally his own eldest son and his family the train is mostly depicted as a sign of industrialized modernity in much Indian cinema from this period...here it functions as a symbolic agent of political, national and familial estrangement.(139)

In the first scene of the film *Garam Hawa*; Salim Mirza is shown seeing off his sister and her family at the railway station who are leaving for Pakistan, then during the course of the film his elder brother Halim Mirza and his family leave their ancestral home for a promised land in Pakistan. This departure of Halim Mirza along with his son Kazim Mirza further isolates the Mirza family and aggravates their woes as Amina the daughter of Salim Mirza is betrothed to Kazim and his departure dims her chances of marital bliss. Kazim's sudden return to Agra further complicates the situation as his identity has undergone a sea change, now he is perceived as a Pakistani who fails to register himself with the Indian police on his arrival in India and is eventually arrested and sent back to Pakistan when he is about to be married to Amina.

The heartbreak sucks Amina into depression from which she struggles to come out when her sister in law forces her into a relationship with her brother Shamshad; only to be deserted again as Shamshad and his family also move on to Pakistan. This time Salim Mirza is not alone to bid goodbye to Shamshad and his family but Amina is also seen bidding farewell to her fiancé at the railway station. Change of nationality also leads to change of loyalties, vows and love. Amina's desertion first by Kazim and then by Shamshad devastates her completely as she embraces death wearing her bridal veil—which is symbol of her dreams, hopes and yearnings. Amina, her mother and her grandmother, the three women in the film are passive and mute spectators of the change that is happening around them. They are denied any agency to exert their will or to bring about any change. While preferring to remain oblivious of the larger national politics and having unyielding attachment towards the home; these women reflect the emotional bonding to a space in which they have spent their lifetime engaging with the daily activities of life. These women are the worst victims of the partition as this not only brings material change in their lives but affects them emotionally as well and leaves them scarred for life. Unable to bear this truncated existence Amina and her grandmother succumb to their miseries and embrace death as the only way out of this nothingness.

Salim Mirza's family is also a victim of government policies regarding evacuee property. Mirza's ancestral home was registered in the name of his elder brother, Halim who leaves off for Pakistan after partition and hence the ancestral home is declared as evacuee property. Consequently; Salim Mirza has to shift to smaller house along with his reluctant mother and family. The family of Salim Mirza has fallen to bad times where they are not only abandoned by their relatives but have to evacuate the ancestral home which was a witness to all the cherished moments of their lives and has provided them with shelter and strength through the thick and thin of life. The suffocating existence of Muslim families is effectively conveyed through the ever limiting spaces to which this family has to adjust to in the changed scenario.

The ancestral home or the Haveli of Salim Mirza is the metaphor of homeland on an extended canvas and as Amma Jan (grandmother of Aamina) is not ready to leave the haveli and finally withers away and dies when she is uprooted; likewise for Salim Mirza India is his home and that is the only identity that he had lived and breathed through and this is the soil where he can bloom and blossom and will get annihilated if he is transplanted to an alien land. Salim Mirza and his family continuously struggle to retain the identity of an Indian as their very existence is bound by the same.

Intolerance and Distrust between Communities

The movie sensitively depicts that in the post partition scenario there is a general atmosphere of intolerance and distrust towards Muslim community as there are several Muslim families who are moving to Pakistan and Salim Mirza's shoe business suffers losses due to this changed scenario. Hindu businessmen look towards Salim Mirza with suspicion and distrust and are reluctant to continue business with him. In one such instance Salim Mirza is unable to complete the order as nobody is ready to give him financial help or loan. His eldest son is frustrated by the uprightness of his father as Salim refuses to change himself with the changing times. Initially Salim Mirza is averse to join strike called by shoe makers association and remains distanced from all such movements and contestations.

In a very defining and outstanding scene we observe that Salim Mirza while travelling on his way to his shoe factory in a tonga is met with a minor accident as the tonga collides with a fruit vendor's cart even while the tongawallah cries out a warning. This small accident leads to violence and rioting in which Mirza's shoe factory is put to flames and he himself is also injured. This episode speaks volumes about the venomous atmosphere of intolerance which can turn minor scuffle or accident into communal riots and many such scene of violence are oft repeated in contemporary India as several cities and villages are doused in communal flames. In this general atmosphere of heightened emotions, prejudice and bigotry Salim Mirza realizes that he has to prove his love and loyalty for his country at every step and any thoughtless action taken on his part can prove him to be a traitor; as it

happens when he sends the map of his ancestral home to his eldest son living in Pakistan and gets arrested on the suspicion of being a spy. Priya Kumar writes:

Indian Muslims invested with the unfair burden of partition's legacies, are often held accountable not only for the past of partition but also for the ongoing actions and policies of the Pakistani state. Routinely constructed as "strangers" or as "enemy" within" who must be watched or expelled across the border, Muslims are viewed as co-terminus with the Pakistani other and are constantly under pressure to prove and affirm their patriotic credentials. (94)

Kristin J. Anderson in her book *Benign Bigotry: The Psychology of Subtle Prejudice* writes: "Prejudice in members of dominant groups can result in the guilt of recognizing their own privilege at the expense of others. This recognition can manifest in shame, defensiveness, and even outbursts of anger." She further writes that "We cannot distance ourselves from bigotry once we understand that bigotry, even in a "benign" form, is part of the air we breathe and has devastating consequences" (14). Anderson's warning exposes the evil nature of prejudices as she herself concedes that "Bigotry is never benign, even when it exists in the form of subtle prejudice; the apparently innocent assumption people make based on prejudice." (18). Anderson further elaborates that prejudices and stereotypes harm both – those who are stereotyped and those as well who hold these stereotyped views and prejudices. We should pay attention to the warning of Anderson and rise above all forms of bigotry and intolerance by celebrating and respecting our differences and contributing to the diverse and rich culture of India.

Conclusion

In the final scene of the movie *Garam Hawa*, Salim Mirza is seen sitting in a tonga with his wife and youngest son Sikander heading towards the railway station for their journey to Pakistan. As the tonga passes through the streets of Agra they witness a rally wherein the people are shouting slogans for their rights and better employment opportunities. Sikander takes permission of his father and jumps into the rally while Salim Mirza also realizes that the solution to the problem doesn't lie in running away and taking refuge in a different country. He now understands that true freedom lies in conviction of your beliefs, contestation and fighting for justice. He decides to fight for his rights by staying in his homeland and raising his voice against all forms of injustices. Salim Mirza is now awakened to a deeper consciousness wherein he finds himself only as a drop in the larger sea of difficulties and problems which plague the newly independent nation. He now also understands the power of the common man and the need to get united with others in their struggles; to join on the common platform to fight against bigotry, intolerance, injustices, unemployment and corruption. He

joins the mainstream of struggling common man as the film ends with a voice over reciting the poem of Kaifi Azmi:

“Jo door se toofan ka karte hain nazaara
Unke liye toofan wahan bhi hai, yahan bhi.
Dhare main jo mil jaoge ban jaoge dhaara
ye waqt ka elaan wahan bhi hai yahan bhi...”

“People who witness the storm from afar
For them the storm is far and near as well
If you join the stream you will become the stream
This is the call of time from far and near...”

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