

The Various Avatars of IRRFAN: A Star from Bollywood and the Question of Modernity

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“I use stars to make my cinema more effective ... My films are better with stars than without.”

– Jean-Pierre Melville

Scholars have defined stars as “A person of brilliant reputation or talents. An actor, singer, etc. of exceptional celebrity, or one whose name is prominently advertised as a special attraction to the public.”ⁱ Ginette Vincendeau, in her study of the stars in French cinema system, redraws the historicity of the usage of the English word ‘star’ into French to its theatrical roots, with words like ‘monstre sacre’ and ‘vedette’.ⁱⁱ She notes how some of the best French stars like Jean-Paul Belmondo, Anna Karina and Jeanne Moreau were trained in theatre. This would certainly put the actor Irrfan in the very same lists, if not higher, as some of these world’s best known stars. However, if there is one thing that differentiates Irrfan from other stars, it is his penchant for doing the roles of ordinary men in ordinary situations that he stated in public in many times. His mass appeal, even when he went on to do Hollywood films, was based upon this down-to-earth attitude, which made him relatable to common masses.

The paradox was the same as we find with Gandhi: the more we renounce, the more we rise up higher than ordinary mortals. Perhaps, a comparison with Gandhi is apt here for other reasons as well. Scholars have noted Hindi films’ affinity to Gandhianism, not only in the subject matter of these films, but also how the ideology of renunciation can be linked to Gandhism. However, late actor Irrfan was also more than that. Perhaps, he also related with other shades of progressivism in Indian history, which we need not explore here. In this essay, we analyse some of his most popular films and see where did he stood as an actor and, perhaps, as a symbol of certain modes of thought.

One of the pioneering roles that Irrfan played was his portrayal of Paan Singh Tomar in the film with the same title (2012, dir. Tigmanshu Dhulia). Paan Singh Tomar is story of former army soldier and an athlete who is unable to find justice for his beleaguered family in central India’s “heart of darkness”. He becomes a rebel and avenges the killing of his family by becoming a virtuoso Robin Hood. Even when he takes to crime and the life of an outlaw, he does not renounce his humanity and sense of justice. The famous dialogue “I am not a dacoit, who are in Parliament. I am a rebel” is a fitting tribute to Irrfan’s preference for playing such characters in films. The story of Paan Singh Tomar. M. Madhava Prasad’s book argues that cinema in India is part of the institutional struggle of the state to subsume forms of life which are yet to be dominated by the state. Borrowing from Fredric Jameson, Gramsci and Marx, he argues that this is an important ideological aspect of the historical process of ‘formal subsumption’, which means that while life at the actual level may not change much, but it comes under the rubric of state’s power.ⁱⁱⁱ Seen this way, Paan Singh Tomar seeks confirms this hypothesis. It shows the inability of the state to provide security and good life to people in hinterlands, but its overwhelming power to destroy rebels like Paan Singh Tomar.

Maybe we should go further back in history to see how this formal subsumption looked like in European history. Eric Hobsbawm’s book *Primitive Rebel* (1959) is also concerned with ‘social banditry’: Hobsbawm brings forth the lost histories of dacoits who rebelled against capitalism in the age of Industrial Revolution: Brazilian Lampiao, or the haiduks of south-eastern Europe.^{iv} According to Hobsbawm, these examples from nineteenth century show pre-political anticapitalist sentiments which later on merged with socialist politics. Thus, it is not difficult to find characters like Paan Singh Tomar from other parts of the world as well: they represent a resistance to the growing rule of capital upon a population which is only being inserted into capitalism. Paan Singh Tomar can thus be thought of as a subalternist hero. The difference between the ‘primitive rebels’ of the nineteenth century and that of Paan Singh Tomar is perhaps that the possibility of the transition of the modern is forever exhausted in the latter’s case, which explains its heightened appeal to the anti-capitalist mindset.

A similar role awaited Irrfan in Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* (2014). A faithful adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* but in an Indian context, the film is a telling example of filmic translation cutting across contexts and time. It is a story of an Aligarh University educated Kashmiri youth, named Haider, who visits back his home to find that his father has been claimed dead in an anti-militancy operation by the Indian Army, while his mother (Ghazala) is about to marry his uncle (Khurram), who is an emerging local politician. The story revolves around Haider’s quest for his father, whom he believes is not dead. Haider is informed by Roohdaar (played by Irrfan) that his father died in police custody and not in the Army operation after being set up by Khurram, and that he wished him to revenge Khurram’s betrayal. Haider confronts his mother, who is also torn in his incestuous desire for his mother. In the process, Haider loses his girlfriend,

his wife and eventually is killed in another army operation. Irrfan's character Roohdar comes across as the literal embodiment of the Ghost from the original Shakespearean drama. Roohdar's ice cold but efficient truth telling has the effect of setting in motion the whole narrative, even though he is a minor character. The choice of asking Irrfan to play that important character was perhaps a well thought move.

Why does Haider attract our fascination? Again, because the original Shakespearean tragedy finds its most fascinating counterpart in its contemporary Indian avatar, which is a problematic similar to that of Paan Singh Tomar. The film reminds of Perry Anderson's claim, while critiquing Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Thin Air*, that almost all masterpieces of anti-capitalist nature either precede modernism proper or flourish in societies like Latin America, India where the project of modernity is yet, evoking Habermas, unfinished.^v Haider thus appeals to us in its very excessive knowledge: it is a story which is known to everyone in advance, and yet everyone disavows it. The indeterminacy of Haider is also because he knows the true meaning of his desire (incestuous love for mother), and therefore he cannot act and kill Khurram (when he has the chance). The indeterminacy in Haider is to be linked to the excess of enjoyment that capitalism as perversion (which Lacan incidentally called as 'pere version' – versions of father) brings about: the postponement of enjoyment generates its own enjoyment (of even guilt). Thus, Haider becomes a story of not only the main character's psychic traumas: it is also a story of the social issues surrounding his home and beyond.

Lastly, Irrfan's film *The Lunchbox* (2013, dir. Ritesh Batra) is of peculiar interest. It is a story of misplaced lunch box in the Mumbai food delivery system (dabbawalas), which connects an estranged wife to a office working widower. The food is so delicious that one day Irrfan decides to thank the anonymous cook by putting in a note. The two start to communicate regularly from then on and develop a bonding which soon develops into feelings. The two decide to flee their lives to Bhutan, but at the anointed day Irrfan decides to let the younger woman live her own life. The charm of the film resides in not only the developing romance out of misrecognition (a key element of Marivaux's *Jeux de l'amour et du hasard*), but also how it shows the miserable lives of most ordinary people. The very system of delivering lunch boxes stands as a testimony to the growing alienation of city lives, which modernity perfects into a routine. The various city train journeys in which Irrfan's pointed sociological observations about the speeding up of times and lack of services develops into a powerful critique of modern life, not unlike Baudelaire's critique of modernity at the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps, Baudelaire too would be fascinated by the Mumbai lunch box delivery system: people come and go into the city but the system of lunch boxes prevails ("Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, which make up one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.")

There is another theme that is worth exploring in *The Lunchbox*: the absence of sexual relationship. Just like in Lacan's famous formula 'there is no sexual relationship', *The Lunchbox* too provides confirmation of the same. What if the romantic aspect of the two principal characters was limited to the game of exchanging letters and what if the moment of actual realization of their love was also the moment of the game being over? It is perhaps for this reason that Irrfan's character decides to not realize the logical culmination of their communication. In this way, the true fantasy is saved ("what if the two people had met in real"). The true fascination of the film resides in its very abrupt ending, thus rendering the central crux of the film as some kind of Habermasian problematic of communication.

We can now conclude our observations. The unending charm of Irrfan's film career lies in basically two things: (a) his portrayal of ordinary people; and (b) the central plot of his stories thus giving an account of the very specific Indian version of modernity. Irrfan has done similar roles in other movies, most notably *The Namesake* (2006, dir. Mira Nair) and *Maqbool* (2000, dir. Vishal Bhardwaj). *Piku* (2015, dir. Shoojit Sircar) also has more or less the same elements. In *The Namesake*, the contingency of life and death is raised into a retrospective positive attitude to life which becomes the guiding principal for the son named Gogol; in *Piku* the taxi operator Irrfan has a life lesson for the dying old Bengali father (played by Amitabh Bacchan). Time and again, he delivers the same lesson in almost every film, that the project of modernity plays out in essentially different roles in different conditions. The connection between a fast changing Delhi and slightly unchanging Kolkata is also brought about in the film as a study in contrast. Irrfan thus comes across as an actor who not only brings out the most salient features of our social lives but also the larger themes that are at work in our texts and contexts.

REFERENCES

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 - iii M. M. Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

^{iv} Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Hachette UK, 2017).

^v Perry Anderson, "Modernity and revolution." *New left review* 144, no. 1 (1984): 96-113.