



Riot of Emotions in *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*

Pooja Halyal

Abstract

The Partition of 1947 into Pakistan and India brought in its wake a spate of violence and communal hatred unprecedented in the history of the world. The raw wounds of the mutual mass murders of both Hindus and Muslims have been bleeding over the years with attacks and counter attacks from both the religious groups at almost a regular frequency. The secularism advocated by Gandhiji and Nehru to bridge the gulf between the two groups has not been successful in smoothing the ruffled feathers and healing the scarred minds. The concept of 'unity in diversity' as the organizing principle of Indian ethos which has been consciously propagated over the years has failed to penetrate the psyche of the religious groups and done little to eliminate the prejudiced perceptions of each other. However, attempts to lessen the strife between the two groups by elevating the values of humanity that is beyond the sectarian attitudes have been made and ongoing at several levels in India. The film industry too, because of its extensive appeal to the masses of all sections of the society has left no stone unturned to curb the lurking hatred between the two groups. It is in line with such films like *Roja*, *Veer Zaara*, *Gadar*, *Bajarangi Bhaijaan* and many others that Arpana Sen's *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* sensitively projects the notions of Nation as an imagined community, of how it is forged, the obstacles to it and the ultimate triumph of human spirit of love and cooperation. This paper is a study of the film *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* focusing on its portrayal of the formation of India as a Nation and its multiple dimensions.

Keywords: Imagined Community, Nation, Secularism, Humanism, Religion.

It is ironic that even after 73 years of Indian independence from colonial rule of the British, wrested after a popular and protracted struggle for civil liberties, the concept of India as one Nation and all its people living in harmony with one another is unfortunately, far from reality. The very spirit of nationalism that had pollinated the entire India since the 1920's leading to the upsurge of a united goal of achieving independence, today needs to be revisited, as the very essence of nationalism is fraught with much disparities of thought and action. The post independent India has faced an onslaught of violent attacks, not just from her neighbours but also from within her womb, bringing to the fore the unresolved continuum of differences, hatred, bias existent among the people though they all belong to one Nation. Be it the Godhra incident, the burning problem of Kashmir, the repercussions of operation Blue star, the consequences of the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the fall of WTC, the attack on Parliament and many more, all portray a Nation that is disturbed and in throes of pain, suspicion lurking among its peoples for one another divided into castes, classes,

communities, religions, race and gender. As Dr. Ambedkar had so fervently opined in his speech that mere political unity without the social unity would not augur well for the nation, India today is a burning cauldron of various unresolved issues.

Even as early as in the 1920's the national movement had ignited the spirit of Nationalism in the minds of the people of India, the violence during the non-cooperation movement clearly hinted at what was to come. Although Gandhiji's faith in the emancipatory potential of nationalism caught the imagination of almost all the leaders of the freedom struggle, resulting in independence of India, it was the anxiety and apprehension of Rabindranath Tagore about the aggressive edge of Nationalism that eventually came true. It is this vein of thought that has been sensitively captured by Arpana Sen in *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*, a film released in 2002, which went on to bag several national and international awards too.

Mr. and Mrs. Iyer on a surface level emerges as a Hindu Muslim love story blossoming under threatening surroundings of communal riots. As does the saying 'amor vincit omnia,' it can be seen that the power of love can conquer all human made barriers. The characters of Meenakshi Iyer and Raja Choudhuri alias Jahangir Choudhuri evoke the natural sentiment of love that emanates out of caring and sharing for each other amidst dangers breaking apart the notions of religious differences between them. However a critical viewing of the film unravels it as a critique of Nationalism in India, which has failed to bring the disparate elements of the nation within the cultural-political logic of nationalism. Despite attempts to imbibe the consciousness of being a nation in the popular mind, through props of National boards, flags, captions and quotes, which are highlighted in visual screen shots all through the film, the communal differences among the people that is triggered off into violent hatred at the slightest provocation is sensitively captured. In fact the 'bus' that is headed from the North to the South of India itself is a microcosm of all that India is. Those on board the crowded bus constitute a cross section of Indian life—Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, higher and lower castes, middle class and poor. Most of the passengers cannot speak each other's native tongues and so all of them need to speak in English, however faulty it is revealing another ironic dimension of united India that needs to depend on the coloniser's language for its unity. With a focus on rendering the diverse Indian population covering the regional distinctions, accommodating varied interests and attitudes of its people according to their age, sex, caste, class, religion and race the different people on board the bus comprise the populace of India. The old Muslim couple and their non-intrusive presence, the young gang of teenagers teeming with boisterous uproar, the bored middle-aged adults depending on drinks and cards to while away their time, the young mother Meenakshi with her demanding infant Santanam, the Muslim wild life photographer Raja alias Jahangir alias Mr. Mani Iyer with his keen understanding of human emotions, the newly married couple lost in their own world careless of all else, the unfriendly older women easily irked by the younger women's burden of motherhood, the autistic boy who often are misfits in this man-made world of self-reliance and finally the Jew who ends up betraying the old couple to save his own skin - all of them weave the fabric of Indian ethos of diverse multiplicity.

The journey of this mini-India is thwarted and tested at the outbreak of a Hindu-Muslim riot. In the face of a life threat from a Hindu fundamentalist group, all the passengers pulsate as one group negating the presence of any Muslims in the bus, but its only the Jew who yet again continues the legacy of betrayal by pointing at the harmless old Muslim couple, in order to divert the attention of the Hindu terrorists from himself, anxious of being mistaken as Muslim because of being circumcised. Hence, yet again, the betrayal does not emerge from within India, but the one who remains alien to its culture of sacrifice, tolerance and unity. It's from this point, the film clearly satirizes the made-made society, its structures

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and rhetoric of ethno- religious nationalism which in its attempts to unify people only ends up alienating them from their natural humanity.

The subtle portrayal of Meenakshi Iyer's consciousness and conscience is indicative of the natural instincts of humanity ever present in all versus the identity, bias and attitude formation based on the social grooming, that is repressive of natural harmony and fellow feeling. For instance, after unhesitant acceptance of help with her infant child, rendered by Raja at the beginning of the journey, very appreciatively, thinking him to be a Hindu and then her sudden withdrawal from him after realizing his Muslim identity is noteworthy of how preconceived notions on the basis of religious differences can affect the natural feelings of harmony between individuals. However, at the nick of danger, she overcomes her religious prejudice, recovers her humanity and saves Raja from violent extremists by claiming him to be her husband, Mr. Iyer, thereby saving not just his life, but also her humanity. The film from then on focuses on the natural fellow feeling of care and concern flowing between the two, irrepressible by any barriers. The emotional riot foregrounded against the external violent riot is explained in all fineness. Their forced shelter in an abandoned, isolated forest guest house takes them away from the malice, hatred and violence of the man-made world. The forest which houses the wild is ironically more congenial for co-operation and uninterrupted togetherness of humans. A sight at night of the beautiful herd of deer majestically moving witnessed so happily by both of them through the photographic lens of Raja is symbolic of the solace and harmony that is so natural, where the laws of who should love whom and how much do not apply. The serenity of the scene bespeaking of the natural laws of coexistence in the animal world is immediately disturbed when a group of armed men chase a terrified person and butcher him in all grossness, which ironically juxtaposes the cruelty and hate of the human world with that of the serene wildlife in the forest just witnessed by them. It is only in the laps of nature that the two people are able to shed their religious and gender inhibitions and understand and appreciate the humanity in each other creating an aura of peace and trust. The early morning scene capturing Meenakshi now carefree, happily smiling for the first time in the film with Santanam also cheerful and free in the forest, being photographed by Raja shows the elemental humanity at its best. She is now revealed as she is without the guard of biased conditioning of the human world. However, the sight of harsh violent attack at night disturbs the peace of the morning, and the sick and traumatized Meenakshi is nursed by Raja celebrating the fine chord of fellow feeling that pulsates beyond all the constructed barriers in the human world. But, this idyllic world of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden cannot last for long and the world of reality inscribed over the years with selfishness, pride, power, hate and violence takes over. The mind-battering nature of the visual display of the burnt villages, pillaged property, strewn dead bodies, the cries and orphaned children is deliberate to show the meaningless destruction brought about by the sectarian forces.

The abrupt end of the natural bonding between them is orchestrated in the train journey back to Calcutta, signifying that life itself is a short lived journey, where people co-travel for short periods and alight at their respective stops at predestined times. What's important is to make the journey comfortable and pleasurable for one another and allow the free flow of natural humanity between them. While little has changed in the world around them, the short-lived relationship between Meenakshi and Jahangir has given them a new sense of humanity, transgressing the rigid barriers.

Tagore's indictment of nationalism as a menace and his staunch advocacy of internationalism and as Ernest Gellner has remarked, "nations do not create nationalism; it is the other way round: nationalism creates nations" only highlight the need to

acknowledge the limitations of the artificial systems created in the name of nationalism that only delimit the human potential to love endlessly without discrimination. In an attempt to avoid conflicts and co exist in assured secure circumstances; we have ended up drawing borders, setting guards that have created barriers, centers and margins. The recognition of the multicultural and multi-religious character of Indian society and the Universalist and humanist traditions, as expressed in all the religious scriptures and the teachings of our reformers, saints and prophets is the need of the hour. *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* definitely stands tall in this genre evoking the necessary spirit of bridging barriers not just among the people of India but everywhere in the world.

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Bio-note

Ms. Pooja Halyal is an assistant Professor at the Department of Studies in English, Rani Channamma University, Belagavi, Karnataka State, India.

Email Id: skpoojabgm@yahoo.co.in