

A Critical review of the Film Angoor by Gulzar and Comedy of Errors

Gulzar's 1982 film *Angoor* is based on William Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. The theme of the play is mistaken identities. The *Comedy of Errors* is viewed by some commentators as a tragic-comedy in view of the framing story that narrates how the two sets of twins have been separated and the father has been threatened with execution. This "lost and found" framing story essentially a romance according to Northrop Frye's scheme that narrates a tale of familial separation and a quest for reunification through an encounter with a world of snares and illusions prior to reconciliation and rebirth. However, at the core of the play lies a farce, a performative idiom of physical comedy, mugging, and sight gags that revolve around the proliferation of comic confusion that takes place when Antipholus of Syracuse and his slave Dromio arrive at the town of Ephesus, where, without their knowledge, their respective twins reside. In the central scene of the play, the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus mistakes Antipholus of Syracuse for her husband and takes him into her house. Antipholus of Syracuse proceeds to court (love) her sister (Luciana) and shuns the wife's (Adriana) advances, thereby fostering the wife's sense of injustice toward her own husband, who is in the meantime shut out of his own house along with his servant. Elsewhere in the play, relentless chance encounters (coincidences) of the masters with the wrong servant and the servants with the wrong master yield sustained comic confusion.

Neepa Majumdar persuasively argues that the doubles narrative has particular appeal in Indian Cinema and that film is its ideal vehicle, because it affords an actor a star turn in two dramatically different roles. Richard Allen has traced the Shakespearean influence on Indian Cinema. He is of the opinion that with the introduction of colonial English literature curriculum and its educational mandate, Shakespeare's influence was felt on Bengali literary and cultural tradition. In this tradition Shakespeare was accorded a certain reverence and authority, his affinity to Sanskrit tradition was acknowledged, and his plays were indigenized by incorporating the song and dance idioms of folk theatre. The tradition was revived in the postcolonial period through the idiom of a literary-influenced realist cinema that yielded the first adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors*, the *Bhranti Bilash* (A play of errors, 1963), directed by Manu Sen. This film formed a sort of model for the Hindi films that followed- Debu Sen's Hindi "remake" *Do Dooni Char* (Two Twos are Four, 1968) produced by Bimal Roy Studios with Gulzar as screenwriter, and Gulzar's *Angoor* (Grapes, 1982), which is considered to be a middle cinema characterized by a realist idiom of everyday middle-class life. The Parsi theatre that flourished in Bombay in 1850s also travelled through Gujarati, Urdu and finally Hindi as the linguistic medium. Parsi playwrights read Shakespeare for his plots, characters, and dramatization. Shakespearean plots in general, and comedies of errors style plots in particular permeate Parsi theatre and also explain the abundance of melo-comedies of mistaken identities in Hindi cinema.

The indebtedness to Shakespeare is nicely asserted in the voice-over narration that introduces *Angoor*. Though we are used to films about twins, the narrator informs us that it was Shakespeare who introduced through *The Comedy of Errors* a plot involving two sets of twins and that *Angoor* will tell this story. Rajiv Verma believes that the cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* have their main source in the Bengali literary and theatrical tradition. The mid-nineteenth century saw the emergence of Indian elites who appreciated the literary and cultural values enshrined in Shakespeare's work. The leading figures of Bengali Renaissance like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Rabindranath Tagore sought to draw upon the example of English literary tradition and tried to represent the embodiment of civilized values in order to create an indigenous literary culture that might equal or surpass it. Echoes of the opening of *The Comedy of Errors* are found in Tagore's novel *Naukadubi* (Shipwreck) that begins with a storm that wrecks the boats of two wedding parties and results in one of the wives being paired with the wrong husband. It was Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who first translated *The Comedy of Errors* in Bengali in 1869 called *Bhrantibilas*, which in turn inspired its first cinematic adaptation *Bhranti Bilash* by Manu Sen.

Bhranti Bilash and *Do Dooni Char* are broadly realist in their idiom in the way they update Shakespeare's drama to the present, domesticate the story within India, largely eliminate or downscale Shakespeare's wider framing story to give the drama a greater unity, and use location shooting quite extensively. Even Gulzar's *Angoor* adopts these conventions, though it has more of the look and feel of a Bombay film of the 1980s in its deployment of colour and the zoom lens while, in narrative terms, it departs significantly from the first two works.

The film *Angoor* omits the larger context of the father who is imprisoned and threatened with execution, as well as the concluding scene of the play where the mother turns out to be an abbess in the local monastery who harbours the fleeing visitors. The story becomes, instead, a domestic one, in which the visiting Antipholus is shown as living with his mother, goes on a business trip with his servant to a neighbouring city. In fact, in the film the father and the mother of the Antipholuses (Ashoks) are shown at the beginning as a sort of preface and the narrator giving details in the voice-over. They are about to embark upon a sea voyage but have arrived quite early (two hours) and hence wait in the waiting room when they learn that twins infant boys have been abandoned by their mother at the doorstep. Being well to do, they decide to take care of these abandoned twins hoping that they shall serve their sons in future. Soon we see a ship caught in a tempest and sinking. This part of the film is filmed in black and white. The ship journey was the only means of travel in Shakespeare's time and is transposed into train journey in the film. It is striking to note that the master-slave relation in Shakespeare has been converted into master-servant relationship by Gulzar and this is in keeping with the prevalence of servants in Indian middle-class life. In the play we wonder how the two sets of twins bear identical names in spite of being separated soon after birth. But Gulzar has given a very logical treatment to this by introducing a scene regarding the names of the two Ashoks and the two Bahadurs. The father and mother understand that even if the children are named differently they would fail to identify

which is which and the infants unable to declare their identity. So their father decides to leave it for the future to find a way to distinguish between them. The five-act play has to be sufficiently cropped in order to make a film. We see that through the clipping off of a large chunk of the master-servant relationship of the play while adapting it for the film. *The Comedy of Errors* explores the complex relationships of power and mutual dependency in the master-servant relationship that is comically dramatized in Shakespeare by the repeated beatings administered on the hapless Dromio through no fault of his own. In the play, the servants exercise power through their command of wit that matches their masters' and their power is inevitably attenuated in contexts where the role of language is lessened. However, in the film we are invited to sympathize with the servants as they continually get beaten when they are cast as the unwitting bearers of confounding messages or abused in their role as go betweens. Gulzar has achieved precision by trimming or minimizing the role of the father in the film and also done away with a lot of witty wordplay on the part of the servants that consumes a substantial part of the initial acts in the play. The visiting Ashok is rather dragged by Tanu to her sister's home after a concert in an attempt to resolve the differences between the husband and wife against the chance meeting of the wrong pairs of Ashok and Bahadur.

The necklace episode is maintained in the film by Gulzar and in this is seen fidelity to the source text i.e. Shakespeare's play. The incident serves to strengthen the realistic aspect in the film as love for gold ornaments is very common among Indian women and it is but natural for a wife to nag her husband for a gold necklace as a token of his love. When the visiting Ashok and Bahadur are trapped in the house of the indigenous Ashok, the film introduces the 'bhang' scene wherein bhang is used in pakodas with the aim of escaping from the house after treating Sudha and Prema with them. This is Gulzar's ingenious invention. In the event of the visiting Ashok having to spend the night in his brother's house with his sister-in-law who believes him to be her husband, Gulzar makes effective use of the scene to avoid any immoral or indecent scene from happening. Overall the film takes pains to avoid an explicit representation of desire on the part of Ashok as it would compromise the character of the sister-in-law. At the point where it is time for the mistakenly identified protagonists to bed down for the night in the strangers' house, Gulzar introduces the 'bhang' scene into the story. The immediate plot motivation is that by offering pakoras laced with bhang to the women, the men will be able to escape. However, in the end both men eat liberal doses and bhang becomes a pretext for broad comedy as the master and his servant fall about laughing with their respective partners and the stoned servant Bahadur, staggering about the house, starts hallucinating in a song sequence. The bhang conceit thus adds physical comedy- mugging and broad slapstick humour- to the farce. Initially, it seems that Ashok follows Bahadur's instructions. He feeds the pakoras to Sudha, who soon falls asleep, and avoids eating them himself. He then enters Tanu's room and offers her the pakoras, however, he also begins to partake of them himself. The suggestion might be that he intends to loosen their inhibitions and yet he remains entirely to cy passive and their relationship is portrayed more like that of brother and sister. It is as if Ashok has to conform to the kind of behavior that would be expected of his brother in order to maintain decorum, even as it may be hinted that he has other

desires. Tanu suspects the pakoras are laced, but he quickly puts her off the scent and they soon fall to laughing and then, after some time, to sleep, he on bed, she on the chair.

The representation of the courtesan (prostitute) poses an enigma for the adaptation of the *Comedy of Errors* in the Indian context. The courtesan is a charged figure in the context of Indian modernity, one who is decadent and yet has some cultural value or virtue. But very few films treat the figure of the courtesan in a nonjudgmental way, unless she is conceived of as essentially innocent. Anoor chooses to portray the role of courtesan as a priestess or spiritual advisor. Hence, Alka wears a saffron kurta and a rudraksh necklace. Ashok's family are also familiar with Alka and would not acknowledge her if she was a courtesan. Yet the portrayal of Alka is ambiguous. A young eunuch (a castrated man), who might attend a priestess or a courtesan, answers the door, and the way the eunuch greets Ashok suggests that Ashok stays there regularly and treats Alka's place as a refuge from his wife. The ambiguity here between spirituality and sexuality, consonant with post-1960s sexual license, is consistent with the episode featuring bhang, which, while loosening sexual inhibitions, also carries the sublimated aura of spirituality.

The figure of the wife poses a different challenge of representation. Shakespeare represents the wife as shrewish (unpleasant and bad tempered) and excessively demanding on account of her perception that her husband is always absent for meals and her worry that he is therefore unfaithful. Furthermore, she demands that he fetch her a gold chain as if it were proof of his love. Her suspicions are excessive and false and this makes the character seem unsympathetically shrill and hysterical. Anoor motivates the wife's manner not by her husband's behavior toward her but by the fact that she is overly sexually demanding. After seeing the game of cards where Ashok accidentally plays footsie with his sister-in-law, Ashok's relationship to his wife Sudha (Moushumi Chatterjee) is introduced via a romantic love song with which she serenades her husband. He finds her advances tiresome and cloying. He even wipes off her kiss from his cheek, though eventually he patronizingly accedes to her embrace. It is a characterization that to a contemporary Western viewer appears misogynist, and yet is congruent with the sensibility of Shakespeare's play. Complaining to her sister Tanu about her husband's neglect, Sudha appears as a hysterical, pathetic figure. Her foolish appearance is increased by the fact that she holds medication in a cup over one eye to clean it. Tanu points out to her that she has been crying so much it is really quite unnecessary, but she doesn't listen, and insists on wielding the cup, like a black eye, nonetheless. The portrayal of a rather stupid, but sexually voracious wife does work effectively when it comes to presenting the comic situation of seduction between the visiting Ashok and his brother's wife, and provides a comic parallel and counterpoint to Ashok's encounter with the wife's sister as well as to the downstairs encounter of the servants. As Tanu desperately tries to inject a spark of romance and desire into the hopeless domestic situation--- "Don't mention the necklace," she tells her, "and give in to all his demands". This leads to a comic as well as erotic situation.

Shakespeare's comedies are said to end in the ringing of marriage bells with an ensemble of marriages. IN the play the father and mother are reunited towards the end, differences between the indigenous Antipholus and Adriana are resolved, Luciana most probably finds her soulmate in the visiting Antipholus and perhaps Luce and visiting Dromio too will most likely get hooked. But in the film Angoor, indigenous Ashok and Sudha succeed in resolving their differences and indigenous Bahadur and Prema are already married and no other conjugal relation materializes in the film; nor is there any scope for illicit relationships in the film. Thus, Gulzar has succeeded in presenting a beautiful and sheer comic film with a realistic fabric.