

APUR SANSAR - OF LOVE AND ANGUISH: A RHAPSODY OF INTENSE HUMAN EMOTION

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Abstract

The dream of Apurba Roy of becoming a famous writer is jolted as he faces the most shocking incident in his life when his wife Aparna dies during child birth. Disheartened beyond measure, he becomes a recluse and moves around till his friend Pulu persuades him to return to his son, who is brought up in his in-laws house. Apu finds a new meaning of life when he meets his son and starts his journey afresh with renewed hope. “Joy and woe are woven fine, A clothing for the soul divine”, William Blake’s immortal lines find a perfect simulation in this flawless creation of Ray. The plethora of the close-up shots used by the auteur to accentuate the moments of joy and sadness is another vital feature of this last film of the Apu Trilogy.

Key Words: Apu, Emotion, Huffing, Happy, Moment, Natural, Train

Introduction

The wheel of life of an ordinary boy from rural Bengal completes a full circle in the Apu Trilogy. The story begins with the depiction of childhood frolics of Apurba Roy, the protagonist, and his elder sister Durga in *Pather Panchali* (1955), with the typical household chores performed by their mother in a village setting. In *Aparajito* (1956) Satyajit Ray has beautifully captured the developmental changes of Apu from a boy to the young adult along with his academic achievement. The life of Apu finds a clear direction and docking in *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu, 1959), following a series of untoward incidents in his personal life. While Ray relies more on the cornucopia of natural beauties of a lesser-known Bengal village in *Pather Panchali*, here in *Apur Sansar*, powerful expression of intense human emotions both during the time of happiness and sadness hogs the limelight.

True Neo-realistic Approach

Ray is known to be a great follower of Italian neorealism that emerged during 1940s after the Second World War and has made excellent use of the trend in *Pather Panchali* (1955) and *Aparajito* (1956) [1]. After *Aparajito*, Ray has made two films, *Parash Pathar* and *Jalsaghar* both in 1958, which are somewhat deviation from his earlier neo-realistic trend. In *Apu Sansar* (1959), the maestro returns with all the elements of neo-realism in the true sense of the term. Even before the title card of the movie rolls out, Ray introduces to his audience hitherto unknown Soumitra Chatterjee as the protagonist, Apu –a young, qualified, handsome person ready to embark upon the journey of his life. Soumitra has essayed such an engaging performance in the movie, simply blazing away the screen especially in those sequences demanding burst of emotion that he becomes the most favourite actor in Ray's films in the years to come. Iconic Sharmila Tagore, also making her debut in the film, leaves a surreal charm during her less-than-thirty minute appearance in the movie.

Use of Natural Location and Setting

The mastery and craftsmanship of Ray constructing a scene or the surroundings is stunningly brilliant as well as poetic. After the title card is shown, the camera pans over a sleeping Apu in an old-fashioned room, who wakes up to the huffing sound of the passing train and the sound of rainfall. The wet morning breeze enters through the window, which has a worn-out curtain having a big hole in its middle part. With this shot Ray gives the first glimpse of an ambience, in which the Adult Apurba lives in, with his big dream to be a famous writer in near future. In the next few shots, the audience have already got a clear idea of the surroundings –Apu has to negotiate a long staircase that connects a rail over bridge to its basement area to reach his one-room apartment on the top floor of a multi-storey building, situated by the side of railway track. We can see Ray later in the film using that hole to capture elegantly one side of the pensive face of a sobbing Aparna from the road side (Pic 1a). The very next shot taken from inside of the room shows her melancholic face in front of the curtain, as she has landed in such a poor situation from her affluent parental residence (Pic 1b).



Pic 1a



Pic 1b

Changes in the living room of Apu after his marriage

Ray is regarded as one of the greatest script writers in the film history with such great detailing [1]. A careful look at the living room of Apu before and after his marriage would elaborate the point. Before his marriage, Apu is found to have least concern to properly maintaining his room –a worn-out window-curtain torn in the middle, things kept in an utterly disordered manner (Pic 2a, 2b). The room which looks shabby and untidy during his bachelor days becomes nicely organised after the marriage. The wall of the room, which has been left unoccupied, becomes adorned with the photo-frames of God and Goddesses, curtain has been replaced by a new one and a tab with a small twig has been placed on the window (Pic 3a). A calendar is found freely hanging on the wall, more interestingly the conical hat that usually rests on the head (Topor in Bengali) of the groom as a part of ritual has been kept in one corner of the room (Pic 3b). This makeover is obviously due to the arrival of Aparna, who symbolizes Goddess Laxmi responsible for bringing peace, happiness and prosperity to a home, according to the Indian belief.



Pic 2a



Pic 2b



Pic 3a



Pic 3b

Use of Train Sequence and Steam Engine Sound

The adaptation of the epic novel written by the noted writer, Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay is enough of an implication that Ray himself is a great lover of the Nature. One of the most exciting frames in the history of the world movies shows the train sequence in *Pather Panchali* –first time in their life, child Apu and Durga running through the swaying bed of Kash flowers to see the approaching train, the black coil of smoke curling up into the heaven with the whizzing sound. In *Apur Sansar*, the huffing sound of the passing or standing train in the background, with occasional in-frame presence of the steam engine giving out ascending fumes have been used to great effects to delineate varying moods of Apu throughout the film. Two important moments here are worth mentioning: Apu has just completed reading the romantic letter from Aparna abound in sentimental overdose on his way back home from the office; this is quite stimulatory for the endocrine system of Apu as he picks up a crying baby sitting by the side of the railway track and places the baby on a cot where the mother is sleeping. The joyous mood of Apu is also synonymous with curling smoke given out by a steam engine standing in the backdrop of the frame (Pic 4a). The background score of Sitar played by Ravi Shankar augments the effect of his euphoric mood. The second moment seems to be the most defining in the movie: Apu seems to have received the hardest blow in his life at the death news of Aparna and is shocked beyond measure. Once again the huffing sound of a passing train has been deftly used by the maestro to depict the devastated mental state of Apu –the noisy presence of the train follows a frame in the white backdrop that shows an utterly dejected Apu's face with only the sound of the moving train heard (Pic 4b). There are many other instances in the movie where the sights and sounds of the train augur well for the temperamental sequences.



Pic 4a



Pic 4b

Moments of Joy and Woe are Nicely Woven into the Script

The high point of the movie is definitely the craftsmanship of Ray with which he has sustained a perfect balance between the moments of joy and those of sadness. The entire

movie can be split into three phases, each consuming more or less thirty minutes span. The first phase draws the viewers into the inner sense of Apu – a gentleman, intermediate pass, full of humour, struggling to get a good job, cherish a dream to be writer, and happy. The second phase marks the turning point in Apu's life; this phase is also very engrossing for the movie buffs as well, because of the charming presence of Aparna, played by Sharmila Tagore and her post-marriage romance with Apurba. The series of incidents are well known: Apu gets an offer from his friend Pulu to attend the marriage ceremony of his sister and persuades him to visit a village in Khulna (now in Bangladesh), which would surely excite his creative mind. The groom appearing for the marriage is revealed to have mental disorder; a resolute mother stands in the way of handing over her daughter to that disoriented man, a pall of gloom falls over the marriage arena in the fear that the bride would be considered unfit for marriage in future, on account of missing the auspicious hour for the occasion. Apu is then approached by Pulu to rescue the bride, who initially turns down the request. Ray has made Apu a sensible person; realizing the gravity of the situation, he accepts to marry Aparna. On their third night of wedding (in Aparna's house), Apu appears to be hesitant while talking to Aparna as he is not at all prepared for such an impromptu event of his life. Apu is more concerned about his own economic condition, as Aparna hails from an affluent rural family. When Apu wants to know whether Aparna would be able to live with a poor man like him for a husband, her answer is on the affirmative. Although hailing from the progressive Brahmo family, Ray has all the respect for rich Indian tradition, and culture. This rational discourse between the newly-wed couple reflects a great concern of the maestro for the old values and oriental philosophy.

What follows next for quarter of an hour or so after Aparna starts living with Apurba in his Calcutta residence is the passionate love affair most aesthetically transcribed. The visually stunning portrayal of these romantic moments through close-up shots is better to be enjoyed on screen rather than being described in writing (Pic 5a-f). There are a number of occasions when the two look at each other without much words being exchanged that are strongly evocative of sensuous feelings and more eloquent than verbose uttering. In one morning lying on bed Apu watches Aparna working and holding her hairpin in his hand kept under his pillow. His face is shining with fond memories of what has happened the previous night and opens a pack of cigarette only to find a small handwritten note inside that says — 'Just One. After a meal. You promised.' "No amount of depiction of sex or lovemaking could have created such a beautiful suggestion of romance as this one sequence does" [2]. In another scene, Apu asks his wife, "What is that in your eyes?" "Kajal" (Kohl, a black cosmetic eye make-up) only one word reply is heard from Aparna. Here Ray harnesses to the fullest extent the fabulously expressive eyes of Sharmila Tagore (Pic 5e & f).



Pic 5a-f

Their moments of pleasure, however, become short-lived, as Aparna leaves Calcutta for her parental home where she dies during giving birth to their son. In real time occurrence of

incidents in the film, Ray has masterfully brought about a smooth transition from a state of togetherness to the solitude of profound loneliness. After placing the crying baby on a cot by the side of the sleeping mother (sensory effect of Aparna's letter!), Apu is about to enter his room placing the key in the groove of lock and unexpectedly sees Murari (Aparna's brother) standing on the roof. Apprehending that something wrong might have taken place, he asked, 'What has happened?' We then see a violent burst of emotion, as he hears the heartrending news, and bangs on Murari's face with his robust fist. Ray here spends some precious time to incubate the audience with close-up shots that amply exhibit the pangs of separation on Apu's face and huffing sound of the steam engine with the background score (Pic 4b, 6a-e). This is the beginning of the third phase in the film that continues till Apu enters into a nomadic life style, roaming about from place to place and then unites with his child son at the behest of his friend, Pulu. Though initially reluctant to accept his son, Apu finally realises the need of the hour and cordially embraces the only love left in his life. With renewed hope and vigour, Apu begins on a new journey placing his son on his shoulder (Pic 7).





Pic 6a-e



Pic 7

Conclusion

The eternal appeal the movie *Apu Sansar* continues to hold out is because of the fact that it tells the story of a common man. The journey of every common man in this world can provide enough ingredients to write an exciting story. Moments of joy and those of sorrow are shared almost in equal proportions in the film. And there always remains positivity at the end of the story, which is the hallmark of Ray's films. The Tramp in *Modern Times*, played by Charlie Chaplin, struggles to survive, tides over the harsh situation with the orphaned girl, and finally sets out together for an optimistic journey. Ray also shows here a glitter of hope as Apu carries his son on his shoulder and starts journey afresh for a brighter tomorrow. Perhaps very few movies in the history of world cinema have such doses of this unforgettable close up frames depicting the strongest emotions of joy and sadness. Ray here establishes the highest standard of cinematic excellence and a narrative template that aims to inspire directors and film-makers through the ages. "The greatness of the 'Apu Trilogy' lies not only in its intimate understanding of the intricacies of human nature, but the artistry with which it expresses those truths. Each of the film is filled with wondrous images, and watching Apu's life unfold is like gazing through a window into a rare and unique world" – James Berardinelli perfectly sums up the essence of life we are privileged to see in the final movie of the trilogy as well [3].

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