

A Comparative Critique of Chunilal Madia's Short Story 'Abhu Makrani (Jamadar)' and its Cinematic Adaptation *Mirch Masala* by Ketan Mehta

Shane Happy Desai

Introduction: The Vitalness of Indian Society, Culture and Literature

When looking in the world and world history, Indian had and even today has a remarkable position in all the aspects; be it culture, history, pluralism, diversity, philosophy, spirituality, law, art, architect, heritage, cuisine, hospitality, familial oneness, social structure, social movements and reforms, global influence and multiculturalism and the list seems perpetual. India, on the literary side, has also contributed immensely and seamlessly in the development of western literary ideas to influencing Western society. As Indian is know for its diversity, it is same even in the Indian writings in English and in Indian literature as well. The domain and discourse of Indian literature has always provided an outstanding and distinctive viewpoint of the words and especially the West. It, at times, challenges the conventions and ideologies of the West/world by diversifying the ideas and breaking the literary bondages in an attempt of extend the literary horizon.

In compare to the literature of the West, the Indian literature and Indian writings in English also has a wide spectrum in the Indian sub-continent itself. The southern part of India, know for its Dravidian culture and abundance of tradition, has its own literary array. The Eastern and North Eastern part covers the meticulous life elements of Bengali, Odia, Assamese, Maithili, and Santali people and therefore, known to be contributing to the Indian Renaissance. Furthermore, the North Indian terrain of the country as well as Indian literature has shaped the Indian

literature by providing a rich amalgamation of classical/ancient literature, modern linguistical development and incorporating the Medieval Bhakti Movement and sufism in social and literary disposition.

Talking about the Western part of India, it is known for the folk literature like 'Bhavai' in India and Rajasthan. The literature of this part also provides the early examples of historical literature and the ancient war narratives showcasing the analogies of valour, heroism and greatness of the Rajasthani or Gujarati Maharajs, Rajput rulers etc. The west part of Indian also incorporated the ancient literary traditions and also contributed in what we today call as Indian Knowledge System (IKS). For example the linguistic development from Prakrit and the emergence of the Rajasthani literature Apabhramsha from 8th to 12th centuries elaborates the significance of the West part of India. The land also brought honour by producing many literary giants and literaturist, scholars and critics from Sant Dnyaneshwari, Hemachandra, Sant Tukaram, Narsinh Mehta, Okho, Meerabai, Narmad, Umashankar Joshi, Pannalal Patel to Govardhanram Tripathi, Sitanshu Yashaschandra and G.N. Devy and the list still continues. Not limited to this, the development of literature in the west part also notices various literary ages such as the Jain Literary Tradition, The Bhakti Movement, Sant literature, Folk (Bhavai) literature, Dalit literature (Dalit Literature Movement), Konkani literature, and the Modern Marathi literature by amalgamating the wide prismatic subjects and themes like religion and spirituality, histories, valour, oral literature and tradition also by respecting the colonial intervention and influence of the Portuguese.

If analysed at a very microcosmic level, India, Indian culture and literature is know not only for its diversity but also for its acceptance and embracement. The west part has not only manifested the regional literature but it has profoundly contributed in the Indian writings in English. Authors like Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Meghnad Desai, Harish Trivedi, Manil Suri and even the famous actress and author Kalki Koechlin have their roots in the west of India.

Aim

The present article aims to analyse and critique the Indian culture and the richness of Indianess, particularly magnifying the western part of India and its prominence, not only on the Indian English literature, but also on World literature and Film Studies, cinematography and literary adaptations.

Research Objectives

- To understand the eminence of the Indian literature and Film Studies with a panoramic and prismatic theoretical stand-point,
- To focus and evaluate the genres of short story, film, Film Studies, cinematography and cinematic adaptation of literature simultaneously,
- To critique, compare and contrast the techniques, strategies, thematic/theoretical models, ideological framework reflected in the selected texts/film.

Research Questions

- What role does the Western part of India serve in the development of literary Film Studies at a global front?
- How are the ideological views as presented in the texts impact on the society/audience?
- Why does the local community and rural societal structure become a handy tool of suppression and exploitation?

Film Studies and Cinematic Adaptation: Significance and its Interconnectedness with Literature

With the development and evolution of the various genres of literature and to be more specific, the rise of literary theories gave literature a novel outlook. From 1990s, after the emergence of Structuralism, the words like 'work' and 'text' got a new notional and ideological meaning. Therefore, a text can be considered any piece of literature which definitely includes films. Films and the cinematic adaptations are very

much a part of mainstream/mainline literature in the present era. The discourse of film studies and cinematic adaptation has already gained centrality in the discipline of English literary studies. Singling out the cinematic adaptations of novels of written texts, then it is not that has taken over in the recent times. It would not be wrong to say that the adaptations of the literary texts had started with the invention of cinema itself. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Naughty Anthony*, *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* are some of the early examples of adaptations from literature (Cartmell 2). Even the religious scriptures has been adapted into films such as *The Life of Moses* (1910), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) (Cartmell 2) etc. Not limited to the West, but the adaptations of the Eastern/Indian epics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and many more mythological text is not new. Hence, literary adaptations as a discourse has a well-marked presence in the discipline of literature.

The adaptations and films are the advanced, updated and upgraded version of literature. It extended the boundaries by involving audio visuals, and the modern day technology. The discourses of literature and film studies/literary adaptations have become inseparable today. Literature has always provided the raw and fundamental material to the cinematic industry. They are the binary opposite of each other; that means, not standing on the contrasting sides but the existence of one depends on the other. Literature and adaptations serve as a means of communicating the various layers of the society and widens the reach of cultural, literary and thematic understanding and comprehensibility of a 'text' (Arkan 50).

Chunilal Madia (1922-1968): A Short Life Account

He was a Gujarati novelist and short story writer. He is considered as one of the representative writers of Gujarati literature. Apart from writing fiction, he also contributed to Gujarati theatre by writing plays. He was also a founder and an editor of a monthly literary magazine titled as *Ruchi* which circulated from January 1963 to December 1968 His important novels include *Pawak Jwala* (1945), *Vyaj no Varas* (1946), *Liludi Dharti* (1957), which was adapted into a Gujarati film with the

same title in 1968. He is more known for his short stories. Most of them are set in the Saurashtra – Kutch region of Gujarat. He uses realistic mode of narration to depict the rural/rustic society of these regions. His stories are characteristic in their capturing the specific idiolect and dialect used by the particular rural communities depicted in them. (Madia 21). He has also written sonnets, essays, travelogues and critical essays on Gujarati literature. Madia for his play *Rangada* in 1947 was awarded Narmad Suvarna Chandrak and in 1957 he was awarded Ranjitram Suvarna Chandrak. (Trived 2-10)

Ketan Mehta (1952): A Brief Profile

The director Ketan Mehta was born in 1952, in Navsari, Bombay (now Gujarat). He was educated in New Delhi where he graduated in Economics. He then worked in extensive theatre/drama activities for 'Dishantar Group', New Delhi. He also directed English plays. Then he came to Bombay and worked for Indian National Theatres. He did his graduation from Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, Maharashtra. He also worked in Space Application Centre, Ahmedabad. He made the controversial TV serial 'Vat Tamari' (1977-78) on the issue of landless labours and untouchables in Gujarat. His first feature film was *Bhav ni Bhavai* (1980) (its alternative title was *Andher Nagari*). This film was an adaptation of the 'Bhavai', the folk theatre form of Gujarat region which was pioneered/perfected by Asait Thakore. His other films include *Holi* (1983), *Hero Hiralal* (1988), *Maya Memsaab* (1992), *Oh Darling! Yeh Hai India* (1995), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005), *Rang Rasiya* (2014) and *Majhi: The Mountain Man* (2015). He has also made documentaries and TV serials such as *Folk Fair at Tarnetar* (1982) and *Mr Yogi* (1989). He has made the biographical film on Sardar Vallabhai Patel titled as *Sardar* (1993). (Khatri 157). He got the National Award twice for his films *Bhav ni Bhavai* and *Sardar* as Best Feature Films on National Integration in 1981 and 1994 respectively (Khatri 54).

Chunilal Madia's Short Story 'Abhu Makrani (Jamadar)'

Chunilal Madia's Gujarati short story 'Abhu Makrani (Jamadar)' was first published in his collection of short stories titled as *Roop-Aroop* in 1953. This story is not that much well-known compare to his other stories. Even Madia himself has not included this story in his compilation of self-edited volume of short stories titled as *Madia ni Shresth Vartao* (Madia's Best Stories). This story follows the generic structure of the form of short story. It is only less than of 10 pages and contains around 2,400 words. Its story-line is very thin. It focuses upon a small episode/happening/event. The locale of the story is an unnamed unspecified village in Saurashtra region of Gujarat during the Colonial era around 1940s. The protagonist is, as the title of the story suggests, Abhu Makrani. He works as a watchman/guard at the village's Tobacco Factory which is owned by the village tradesman/merchant Jivan Thakkar who belongs to the upper caste Kachchadia community. He is known as 'Jivan Seth' in the village. In his factory, village women work as daily wagers. One of these women is Gemi. The story deals with the situation where Gemi is pursued by the Thanedar (the local police officer) with sexual intension. Gemi hides herself in the tobacco factory to save her womanly honour. The story shows how the police officer uses all his might/power to get hold of Gemi. He also forces Jivan Seth to make this happen. But Gemi is offered shelter/protection by the elderly watchman Abhu. He locks the massive gates of the factory to stop the police officer's men from entering inside the factory. As a last resort, the police officer sends Jivan Seth to open the gates. The story ends tragically with Abhu shooting himself with his own gun instead of sending away Gemi to the police officer. The central conflict in the story is mainly about Abhu's moral crisis/dilemma to have to choose between the employer's/bread provider's order and his duty to humanity. Unable to choose any of these two, he opts to shoot himself. Madia concludes or ends his story at this point and leaves the reader contemplating on this moral crisis/dilemma.

Chunilal Madia's Short Story 'Abhu Makarani (Jamadar's)' Cinematic Adaptation into Ketan Mehta's Hindi Film *Mirch Masala*

Mirch Masala (1985) is a Hindi film adapted from Chunilal Madia's Gujarati short story 'Abhu Makarani (Jamadar)'. Directed by the Gujarati film maker Ketan Mehta, the film was released in 1985 featuring Naseeruddin Shah and Smita Patil in the lead roles. The film was produced under the banner of National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC). Smita Patil's performance in this film was hailed as one of the greatest acting performances of Indian cinema.

Mehta's *Mirch Masala*, the Hindi film is considered to be one of the first avowedly feminist Hindi films. The film is set in a small non-descript village in Saurashtra region in Western India during the late Colonial period. Mehta develops his cinematic narrative around a fictionalized event set in 1942, the year of the Quit India Movement. The narrative of the film revolves around a concerted/collective resistance attempted by the village women against the abusive authority of the Subedar (the tax collector). The film's main focus is on the spirit of defiance displayed by the female protagonist Sonbai (Smita Patil/Gemi in Madia's Story) who is a peasant woman working as a daily wagger in the local chilli factory. She is relentlessly pursued/chased by the sadistic Subedar (Naseeruddin Shah/Thanedar), who is the local Colonial official functioning as the tax collector in this region. When he forces Sonbai to surrender to his lustful desires, she slaps him tightly and escapes. The Subedar feels that his official authority as well as his masculinity (manhood) has been compromised with sonbai's act of slapping him. In order to fulfil his desires and to take revenge, the Subedar sends his men to capture Sonbai. She evades the soldiers and escapes into the chilli factory where she works. On hearing the plight, the factory's elderly guard 'Abhu Miah' (Om Puri/Abhu Makarani) shuts the gates before the soldiers can enter. When they try to force their way in, he defiantly declares that he will not desist from firing his gun if they try to enter. This lead to the chilli factory being sieged by the Subedar's men.

All the woman workers, under the protection and support of Abhu Miah put up a kind of collective resistance.

The Subedar sends emissary after emissary to the factory to persuade Abhu Miah and the woman workers to hand-over Sonbai. First comes the factory owner Jivan Seth, then the village 'Mukhi' (the village chief/Suresh Oberoi) along with the villagers. But Abhu Miah turns all of them back. He declares: "Mukhi, I'd rather die than be party to this inhuman act. As long as I am alive, I won't let this oppression succeed" Abhu Miah remains true to his promise, eventually losing his life in a cross fire that takes place when the Subedar enters forcefully inside the chilli factory in his final effort to capture Sonbai.

The film ends with a surprising turn of event. As the Subedar advances towards Sonbai, the woman workers attack him with sacks of red chilli powder hurling at his face. The Subedar falls on his knees, screaming in pain as the chilli powder burns his eyes and face. Mehta's film is open-ended as the closing scene shows Sonbai standing stoically with a sickle in her hand and a half smile on her face.

Comparative Critique: In Ketan Mehta's adaptation, the film *Mirch Masala* becomes a political narrative of subaltern class's resistance against the collusive power structures of Colonialism, feudalism, and patriarchy/masculinity. In the film, the chilli is transformed into a rich symbol of female/subaltern resistance against these power structures from just being a kitchen/food/domestic commodity. It becomes a weapon to resist the structural oppression of the joint edifice of Colonialism, feudalism and patriarchy and masculinity. Similarly, the chilli factory is transformed into a site of struggle from being a mere workplace. The film, thus contrary to Madia's story, becomes a multi-layered exposition of the injustice/violence perpetrated by the invisible power structures of society/community, politics, class and gender.

Chunilal Madia's short story does not include such complexity in its singular focus upon the moral crisis/dilemma faced by Abhu Makarani between his sense of 'duty' to his employer (the bread provider) and to humanity. Ketan Mehta adds complexity to this story by expanding the

scope of narration in his transformation of story's minor character 'Gemi' into the film's protagonist 'Sonbai'. Through Sonbai's plight, the film attempts to establish the relationship between women's subjugation to the wider social and historical processes. Sonbai, as she defies the sexual advances of the Subedar, does not limit her attack on just one man but hits out at the whole value-system and ideology that legitimises the subordination of women. The Subedar and the village Mukhi represent much more than just their personal identity. The Subedar is a symbol of Colonial power/authority as a tax collector working for the Britishers. The Mukhi as the village chief is the head of the hierarchical order of patriarchal society. Through Sonbai's struggle against the Subedar, Mehta reveals/exposes the complex interplay of power relations in a small village in Colonial India. This problematizing interplay is a creative ideological grafting on Madia's skeletal story. For this purpose, Mehta has added the characters like Mukhi, his wife Saraswati, the Gandhian 'Masterji', the Hindu priest/pandit, the pair of young lovers Mohan and Radha and Sonbai's husband Shankar. In Madia's story there are merely three characters around which the story revolves: Abhu Makarani, Gemi, and Thanedar. Mehta does not only transform Gemi into Sonbai, but also provides Sonbai's social/familial background by adding the character of her husband who is shown as leaving the village for doing the job in railway in city. In Madia's story, the Thanedar remains merely a shadowy presence in background, whereas Mehta has transformed into a fully developed character of a sadistic tyrant.

The tobacco factory of Madia's story is converted into chilli factory to serve Mehta's ideological objective of showing female resistance to the power patterns. Madia's story ends with the suicide of Abhu Makarani, while Mehta has extended its scope beyond such a point by showing how women retaliate collectively against the Subedar's tyranny. Mehta's film depicts how the red chilli powder that the women workers make into commodity for the local tradesman becomes a powerful weapon in their final attack. The film also uses the technique of open-ended narrative by showing the Subedar collapsing and screaming in painful agony and

the close-up shot of Sonbai looking straight/staring in the camera/audience with a half-smile on her face. The audience at this point is implicated in its desire to know what happens after this – do the soldiers attack? What happens to Sonbai? But Mehta instead breaks the narrative at this point to leave it open-ended so that the audience is implicated in it to participate/reflect/ponder/speculate on the issues raised in the film.

Conclusion

The film therefore highlights the western part of India and the fight for personal rights with the collective efforts. With the colonial setting in the background of the story, both, the story and the film voice the strong mind-set and will to become free not only from the dominant force but also from the strongly grounded social and societal orthodox ideologies and belief systems. Ketan Mehta, by adapting the film, breaks the fourth wall and directly tries to talk to the audience and passing the message with giving it a greater reach. Usage of various literary/cinematic techniques shows Mehta's reliance on the ideology, rationale, morale of Chunilal Madia.

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