



Observing the undercurrents of Multilingualism through the use of auteur theory: A case study of Aparna Sen's film *The Japanese wife*

Mrs Sheetal Sanjay Koradkar

Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Mumbai

ABSTRACT

The world cinema today is known to be a melting pot that replicates cultures, nationalities, ethnicities and identities. Undoubtedly, it plays a major role in shaping the global understanding and thought and the need to appreciate the world cultures. With films crossing their national boundaries to reach out to the world audience it is evident to study its multicultural and multilingual nature. In a nation like India, where numerous languages and culture rule the film screens there is an ample scope to study the effects of multilingualism in the film making process. Indian cinema has always tried to maintain its authenticity by keeping up with its spirit of the nation's diversified culture and traditions by depicting it into its films. But, in the recent years, Indian cinema has reached out to the global audience for their universal acceptance through their realistic stories and convincing plots. This paper will try to present this multilingual status of the Indian cinema through the case study of the multilingual film *The Japanese Wife* directed by Aparna Sen. At the same time, there will be an attempt to look into all those aspects which make the film a multilingual auteurist recreation as an adapted version of the book written by Kunal Bose with the same name through the use of auteur theory.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Indian cinema, auteur theory.

INTRODUCTION

The global cinema is venturing into a new era where there is a demand to welcome all the unexplored areas of human understanding which need urgent notice. In order to reach out to the audience across the world with its new ideas, thoughts and technical innovation cinema today requires being accessible to all. In this process its multilingual approach acts as a cultural force and makes cinema a potent ground that generates wonderful multilingual experience which the audience can relate to. Indian cinema is a part of global cinema that has become the part of the multilingual cinematic journey as the regional films in India have started to gain momentum with their huge fan following crossing the national as well as the international boundaries. Amongst the numerous regional cinemas that rein the cinematic space the new wave Bengali cinema is instrumental in showcasing the Bengali culture keeping the spirit of "Bengaliness"¹ alive through the realistic depiction of the historical and socio-political conditions prevalent in the society. Filmmakers from "Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Gatak, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, Aparna Sen"² and others have set a standard to Bengali cinema. Cinematic works of these filmmakers have gained success nationally as well as internationally for imagining and creating cinema pertaining to the aspects that have universal appeal. Aparna Sen is known to be such an auteur filmmaker whose films have been nationally as well as internationally recognized for their subtle take of social issues of urgent notice. This paper looks into the multilingual aspect that the filmmaker Aparna Sen undertakes in order to exhibit her auteurist touch to her multilingual film *The Japanese wife*.

The Multilingual Indian Cinema

The word Multilingual is defined by *The Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* as an act of "speaking or using several languages"³ from this word arises the word Multilingualism, which is "an ability to use three or more languages"⁴ according to the *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Thus, in Film studies the multilingual films are "movies or documentaries that are shot in more than one language."⁵ Simber Atay in her article "Multilingualism and Cinema" feels that "Multilingualism inspires cinema. In fact multilingualism exists in the nature of cinema. Global film industry is a multicultural and polygot organization"⁶ In a diverse nation like India one can get to live as well as experience multilingualism throughout the expanse of the national boundaries where languages in all forms, ancient, modern, lost, extinct, rare and invented find their space in the national fabric. The expanse of these linguistic boundaries has supported



multilingualism to become the part of the cinematic space in India, where popular cinema bollywood along with the regional cinema make multilingual films for their global audience. Naveen Chandra in his article “The Rise of Regional- A Multilingual decade” senses the accelerated growth of multilingual cinema in India as well as globally when he explains:

The holy grail of films has always been the search for the universal story that appeals to a much larger universe than the one it is set in. When Disney makes a film based on a Lion set in the jungles of Africa, the raw essence of the tale, the story telling craft, and the emotional involvement of the audience as it connects with the characters laughter or tears irrespective of whether he’s watching the movie in the Philippines, in Sudan, In Kiev or in Bhopal; makes it a story with a universal appeal.”⁷

Thus, we see that whether a film belong to the popular cinema, regional cinema or international cinema its ability to tell diverse stories that appeal to the world audience beyond their understanding of the language in form of its multilingual approach makes these films stand out as exemplary pointers of cinematic creative that is shared worldwide by the film makers, lovers, critics, scholars and researchers of cinema.

Thanks to the growing network of OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon, Disney Hotstar, Zee 5 the multilingual films and their remakes have become popular sources of entertainment know for their good stories that are highly diversified, realistic rendering of sensitive issues and portrayal of very true and everyday characters that find their space within the inner conscience of the audience . These multilingual films help in bonding the audiences with a common connect of audiovisual creativity that bring out the deeper understanding of human mind and thought which is universal .Shashi Deshpande and Meta Mazaj in their book *World Cinema:A Critical Introduction* explains the filmmakers reasons to opt for a multilingual model where they highlight that “the reason to opt for a model of multiple- language instead of regional cinema is the remarkable permeability of films and directors from one realm to another. As films are dubbed , remade ,then brought back to the region, they become part of the larger fabric of cinema in India”.⁸

The Japanese Wife as a multilingual film through the lenses of auteur theory

The film *The Japanese Wife* is an adapted version of a short story written by writer Kunal Basu with the same name. The film is known for its Multilingual approach for the filmmaker Aparna Sen uses three different languages to make this film that is English, Bengali and Japanese at the same time the film is dubbed in Hindi to reach out specifically to the Hindi speaking audience within the country. The film is a wonderful display of tenderly and lyrically told surreal story that comes as a fresh display of romantically crafted love story from the book onto the screen about which Aparna Sen herself asserts, “ It is a very ,very unusual story.”⁹She gives her auteur touch to the film when she recreates the film adding elements of melancholy, humour, repressed human emotions and the idea of pure love. An auteur is “a film director whose personal influence and artistic control over his or her films are so great that he or she may be regarded as their author”¹⁰Film as a collaborative entity relies on the filmmaker who controls the entire process of filmmaking in turn become an auteur and tells the story with his or her personal touch to it. Undoubtedly, Aparna Sen is an auteur, who commands the entire filmmaking process with the help of her creative and technical team she works to give life to her films. In this film too, we find her intelligent approach in bringing out the varied dimensions of human life through her characters and the background of cinematic settings to underline their actions.

The film *The Japanese Wife* is an epistolary film as the audience get to know the story of the characters Snehamoy and Miyage through their letters. The story is about genuine and true love between them. Snehamoy, a Bengali school teacher and Miyage, a Japanese shop owner correspond within each other as pen-pals in the early days of their life. This communication further embarks on the journey from being pen –friends to confidants of each other sharing their joys, inhibitions, anxieties and worry and culminate in “pen-marriage”¹¹bounded to each other though physical and cultural difference have set them apart they take their marital vows seriously and continue to do so for fifteen long years. This relation comes to test when Sandhya, a widow and her son Poltu come to stay with Snehamoy and his aunt. Snehamoy’s world which revolves around writing and receiving letters is affected with the arrival of Poltu, in whose company he realizes his role as a responsible caretaker and also enjoys the joys of fatherly duties at the same time there is an inexplicable bond of understanding created between him and Sandhya . A letter from Miyage about her ill health disturbs Snehamoy and tries to reach out to her through her letters and parcels of medicines from various medics. On the suggestion of his doctor friend on a stormy day he visits an oncologist in Kolkata, only to himself get ill with pneumonia due to which he dies. The news of his death is sent to Miyage who comes in person to meet the bereaved family of her deceased husband ,where she is welcomed by Sandhya.

The film comes as a multilingual approach undertaken by Aparna sen about which Anusuya Chakrabarti in her article “Ideas, Thoughts and Letters in ‘The Japanese Wife’” asserts:



“The difference in language and culture are intensified and enriched as the medium when Sen intentionally capitalizes on the multilingual aspect of the narrative where instead of depending on the writer’s narrational English she uses the multilingual approach using raw bangla that is characteristic of the sunder bans.... along with the use of Japanese for scenes shot at Japan and English used for the conversation within the letters and the subtitles”¹²

As a true auteur Sen brings out her style to recreate Kunal Basu’s story on screen keeping its multilingual and multicultural aspect intact. Following observations prove her stand to make it a multilingual film

1. Through the film the audience are given glimpses of both the Bengali as well as the Japanese culture through the apt use of the Bangla, Japanese and English Language in order to target the audience of all the three languages.
2. The societal conditions are also highlighted on screen while the protagonists narrate their letters like Shenamoy worried about how Miyage will adjust to the lavatory at his home and further in one scene where he explains the rituals that a Bengali widow has to follow when he describes Sandhya’s stay at his home.
3. Miyage is shown to tie a ritual thread for Snehamoy’s quick recovery during his ill health. Miyage dressing up as a Bengali bride and smelling the champ flowers sent by Shenamoy on their anniversary. Snehamoy is also shown visiting various medics to get cure to Miyage’s ailment.
4. The filmmaker shows distinct cultural differences with the help of her cinematographer Anay Goswamy recreates settings that match the original version. The camera captures the cultural and linguistic hues along with the scenic beauties of both the quint village at the banks of the Matla river and the Japanese river Nakanokuchi along with the cities of Yokohama, Tsukuba and Ibaraki¹³
5. The filmmaker tries to show how the linguistic limitations can lead to misinterpretations like Miyage meaning the gift and Snehamoy meaning the affectionate one has to be explained by the both the characters. When Miyage shows her inefficiency to pronounce his name correctly, he actually writes to her the proper way to pronounce the word ‘sneh’. His aunt can’t pronounce Miyage’s name and interprets it as ‘maagi’ meaning a woman in Bengali.
6. What brings out within this multilingual aspect is Aparna’s recreation of her hero, played by Rahul Bose, who himself being an astute linguist in terms of usage of English language had to be trained to use the colloquial Bengali and the Bengali accented English throughout the film.
7. Casting in a Japanese female lead Chigusa Takaku to play the role of Miyage is an apt decision by Aparna to recreate a realist feel to the story in order to bring out to the audience the display of Japanese culture and language through the character of Miyage.
8. Through her multilingual take she tries to tackle the complex issues of human life that are common in all the societies. Issues like patriarchal dominance, communalism, repressed sexuality and societal constraints that overpower an individual’s existence.

Thus, it is clear that the filmmaker makes the use of multilingualism as a tool to recreate the most pure form of love story that follows all the norms that a multilingual film attempts to follow. The film represents the required multilingual environment for all its audience. The basic feature of the film is that throughout the film three languages are used. The film shows the stark linguistic differences between the characters. The plot is developed through the articulation of these different languages. The film is given complete support through music, sound and cinematography to provide audio-visual equivalents to present cultural specificities. All these features make the film become a convenient document to discuss the human conditions prevalent amongst the multiple cultures of the world and how the common strand of aesthetic creative by the film maker binds them together.

CONCLUSION

The multilingual cinema and its rise in the present scenario are essentially required to enhance the audience perception on their comprehensive take of intercultural aspects in life. Such films bring out the linguistic diversities that are detrimental for the strong foundation of the globalized world. Whenever an auteur evidently undertakes such project to bring out the various facets of linguistic diversities in form of stories, situations, incidents and characters there is an attempt to give an impetus to the diverse communicative aspects that arise into the mind of the filmmaker. As an auteur such filmmakers give back to the society the varied ways to interpret the stories for their audience which they bring on to screen through their



aesthetic , linguistic and cinematic creativity . Aparna Sen too tries to attempt this feat as true auteur in the film *The Japanese Wife*.¹⁴

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1] Gooptu, Sharmistha. *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, Roli Books, Delhi, 2018.
- [2] Mukherjee Madhiya, Kaustav Bakshi. *Popular Cinema in Bengal: Genre, Stars, Public , Cultures*. Talyor and Francis, New York, 2020
- [3] <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>
- [4] McArthur, Tom, Jacqueline Lam-McArthur. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Oxford University press, London, 2018
- [5] Alicia, “7 Interesting Multilingual Films worth watching”, bilingual.com, February 8, 2018.
- [6] Atay, Simber. “Multilingualism and Cinema”, European Journal of Applied Studies, volume 2, year 2019.
- [7] Chandra, Naveen. “The Rise of Regional- A Multilingual Decade”, Businessworld.in, January 01, 2020 www.businessworld.in
- [8] Despande, Shashi, Meta Mazaj. *World Cinema: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge Publication, New York, 2018
- [9] Sen ,Aparna. “Aparna Sen on how The Japanese Wife was Born”, hindustantimes.com, March 25, 2010. www.hindustantime.com
- [10] Doughty, Ruth, Christine Etherington-Wright, *Understanding Film Theory*, Palgrave publication, London, 2018.
- [11] Basu, Kunal, *The Japanese Wife and other stories* , McArthur & Company, India, 2008
- [12] Bhar , Anasuya. “Ideas, Thoughts and Letters in ‘The Japanese Wife’”. www.academia.com, July 17, 2013, www.academia.com
- [13] Wikipedia .org.wiki. The Japanese Wife.