

THE BLIND MAN'S BLUFF: A NARRATOLOGICAL STUDY OF SRIRAM RAGHAVAN'S NOIR *ANDHADHUN*

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ABSTRACT:

The 2018 Hindi movie *Andhadhun* might be said to have revolutionized the narrative techniques in Indian cinema by opening the scope for implementing narratological devices such as heteroglossia and dialogism. The unreliable narrator-cum-protagonist-cum-observer Akash has weaved an intricate web of fables with the help of his remarkable manipulative power. His assumed blindness, in this respect, has doubly empowered him to exert his control over situations. A master-narrator in the true sense, this 'Omniscient' blind man problematized the traditional binary notion of seeing and not-seeing. An artist in the true sense, his fabrication crosses path with other narratives, and ultimately succeeds to win over all of them. The present article will attempt to show how the fluid nature of the narrative method makes way for narratological discussion with all the applicable theoretical tools.

Keywords:

Narratology, heteroglossia, dialogism, eyesight, blindness, confusion

1. INTRODUCTION:

"Narratology is the study of narrative and narrative structure and the ways that these affect human perception". (Feluga) Accordingly, this study connects the perception of the 'actor' (i.e. one who acts) with that of the perceiver (i.e. the one who is at the receiver's end, and re-acts to the concerned

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act), thereby activating the circuit of any work of art which remains inert in its natural state, without the presence of any receiver (i.e. a reader/audience/viewer/observer). It can also be understood as the way a story can be manipulated by a character, or in the display of medium contributes to how a story is seen by the world. (Rimmon-Kenan) This notion of a character ‘manipulating’ a story, thereby determining the course of its appreciation by the world, is the very reason the present discussion on Narratology has been restricted to *Andhadhun*, a “2018 Indian black comedy crime thriller film” co-written and directed by Sriram Raghavan. This article will resort to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia and dialogism to consider the complex co-weaving of multiple narratives within a larger frame narrative that distinguishes this movie from any other typical Hindi thriller made till date.

2. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS:

The very experience of watching *Andhadhun* is one of discomfiture and uncertainty. One even derives some sort of guilty pleasure in placing oneself in the position of Akash, a pianist, who poses blindness as a means to serve various dubious purposes. Notwithstanding the somewhat complex generic category provided by the Wikipedia, it is far from easy to find the right chord (just like the protagonist himself) which will represent the overall mood of the entire movie. One never knows what to think of Akash’s role-playing; is it a mockery of those who are really deprived of eyesight? Is it possible that he has some hidden motives more consequential than what meets the ‘eyes’ of the characters/viewers? The narrative seems least interested in providing answers to these questions; thus allowing the viewer-critic to discover a celebration of what the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin would call a ‘heteroglossia’. For Bakhtin, heteroglossia is a *reflection* in language of varying ways of evaluating, conceptualizing and experiencing the world. It is the convergence in language or speech of "specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values." (Wiki_Narratology) This notion of multiple parallel perspectives, combined with the dualism of seeing/not-seeing, only heightens the scope of the movie as a perfect locus of narratological discussions.

The term ‘dialogic’ on the other hand refers to the use of conversation or shared dialogue to explore the meaning of something. (Wiki_Narratology) In the context of the movie currently under discussion, the notion of the dialogic is perfectly applicable because Akash’s dissembling acts, or in other words ‘stories’, do not get either believed or rejected unless there is a receptor or audience that engages in a dialogue. This is opposed to the traditional ‘monologic’ movies in the Bollywood which refer to one entity with all the information simply giving it to others without exploration and clarification of meaning through discussion. For instance, the character of Mr. Jindal played by Naseeruddin Shah in a typical *masala* movie *Mohra* (1994) has assumed blindness with some secret, unholy designs in his mind, and once he confesses his scheme, he becomes a stereotypical villain. Akash dwells in the twilight zone; he is neither naïve, nor an obvious villain. That he is part of an act of deception is the first (and is it the only?) thing the viewers get to know from him. An element of trust or sympathy is thus due for this underdog who is after all an artist desperate to shape his way in this world without (perhaps) causing any harm to anyone. Engaging the viewers in some sort of debates regarding the disturbing ‘can-see-cannot-see’ binary of Akash’s narrative is a masterstroke in a thriller which does not deal in cold, universal, fully reliable data or information.

The viewers are invited to get a glimpse of the world of the protagonist through his own ‘blind’ eyes. One is fascinated by his earnest efforts to win perfection in his art (or, *kalaa* in Hindi). Akash, with the intention of drawing the sympathy of Sophie, utters these words which summarize his cynical understanding of the cruelty of life: “*Kalaa aadmi ko bahut kuch deti hai...lekin TDS bhi poori kaat leti hai!*” (meaning: Talent gives a lot to a person...but it also deducts proper taxes for it.) For the omniscient eyes, however, this is also a confession on his part regarding the physical and mental sacrifice he keeps making all the while for his role-playing. There is no denying the fact that Akash is an exceptionally talented pianist; although his audiences appreciate him more for his assumed blindness, without which half of his impact will be lost. From the very beginning, the viewers have entry into the personal sphere of this young man; thus normalizing his bizarre act of deception. An element of understanding, if not trust, is immediately established between the protagonist and the viewers. It is not, however, a light-hearted Rom-Com. A story of deception and guile, it takes the prospect of blindness to a new level altogether. A trickster as per the

convention of morality, Akash gradually gets entangled in his own ‘story’ and ironically becomes blind in the true sense. A victim of his own *karma* (though the simplified cause-and-effect logic might prove to be misleading as well), Akash now makes it easier for the viewers to feel pity for him. That is perhaps the true beginning of the multilayered narrative of blindness which communicates the power adhered to the capacity of watching.

Dialogic processes refer to implied meaning in words uttered by a speaker and interpreted by a listener. In *Andhadhun*, as the movie opens, Akash appears to have been leading a ‘monologic’ life so far, with hardly anyone to interact with. The little voyeuristic boy from the neighborhood occasionally tries to peep into and shatter the narrative Akash has been building with great care, but he must not be allowed to do so. That’s why he is rudely brushed off by this would-be artist who wants to capitalize upon his assumed blindness to be accepted as a great pianist. Now, what about the dialogue with the viewers? Does it count? Dialogic works carry on a continual dialogue that includes interaction with previous information presented. The viewers are however not presented with much information or explanations as regards the past events or motives that have led this young man to preparing this elaborate alternate narrative. For them it all starts *in medias res*. Therefore the viewers are only allowed to see (just like the child), and not to engage in a dialogue. The real dialogic narrative begins only when Akash chances upon Sophie accidentally. Now, is it merely an accident, or a part of Akash’s well-made, almost flawless, narrative? No clear cut, assuring answer seems available, and the viewers will have to look for answers in the dialogues that Akash gets involved in during the course of the movie.

Andhadhun, if one may call it, is a dark comedy. Much of the comedy is derived not from what happens (which is often shocking, violent and even horrifying) but from how they are presented during Akash’s dialogues with other people. He seems to be a victim of his own trope, which often ends him up in sticky situations. In his dialogue with Sophie, for instance, the fact that he cannot see acts as an obvious advantage. He is paid off simply because of his apparent lack of eyesight – he not only gets a job at the pub but also gets to be intimate with Sophie. But the game of power which is involved here is really intriguing. The fact that Akash cannot see would make him a victim. But the fact that he *can* see makes him on equal terms with Sophie or anybody else. And

then, the fact that Akash can see, while the others believe he cannot, enables him to exert an unbelievable power from a highly privileged vantage point. From behind the dark glasses his voyeuristic eyes can catch everyone off their guard, as if representing the one-sided Orwellian surveillance at its best. The victim-card that this trickster keeps playing is the reason he holds real power over the situations.

This game has its own backlashes too, and the tolls it takes can be extremely painful. The notion of heteroglossia seems to be in full motion as the blind protagonist ends up, ironically, ‘watching’ a couple of murders being committed. This is a flip-side representation of the Orwellian observer – one who is assigned with the task of constantly watching the subjects, is not allowed to close the eyes even if one wants. This is the curse of being the Omniscient. The problem that is posed before him endangers his entire ploy – reporting the murder to the police would reveal him as one being able to see, thus aligning his grey intentions with the murderous motives of the people involved. He then must play his role along the parallel narrative (only one of the heteroglossia) that crosses his. The end result of this sort of combination and composition of parallel narratives only problematizes the whole affair. Simi, the master-puppeteer of the other narrative, has rendered Akash blind. And yet, she cannot be very sure about the truth behind his blindness; neither can the viewers. It is this element of uncertainty which darkens the atmosphere of the movie, and dethrones Akash from his position of undisputable authority. His blindness, this time real (or so we are told!), now turns him into a pathetic being, a victim of the whimsical treatment meted out to him by the dehumanized world of greed, lust and ambition. Isn't he the very representative of the same world? We must postpone the question for a while.

Andhadhun is a thriller of sort which uses an all-pervading atmosphere of confusion. The protagonist's motives, to begin with, are neither well-defined nor convincing enough. A ‘maestro’ in the true sense, Akash knows how to bemuse the audience with his art. He has assumed this blindness, as he claims, to take in only the essentials from his surroundings and better focus on his work. Truly obsessed with his music, he is also an ambitious careerist (who has made his way into some news article as a blind artist, as we get to know) who would like to move to London whenever he can afford. Initially therefore it is a story of deception, but without any obvious motive that

might be termed as harmful. The story moves forward with Akash chancing upon a number of people, all of whom are somehow necessary to turn his dreams into reality. In fact, the plot relies too much on chances and coincidences – Akash chancing upon Sophie, which leads to his getting a part-time job as a pianist, then leading him to meet the former actor Pramod Sinha and subsequently ‘watching’ his murder and getting entangled in this racket of organ harvesting. Since this happens to be a narrative of deception (and the viewers are often at the victims’ end), it is not difficult to believe that the whole ‘plot’ may have been made up by the protagonist himself. Far from being a blind man, he then becomes the only person with his ‘eyes’ over the entire series of events. It is his narrative that we all are entering, and we can never separate the truth from the fictitious.

The story could have easily become an account of the heroic feats of the protagonist against all the odds – already featured in popular Hindi movies such as *Koi...Mil Gaya* (2003), *Black* (2005), *Guzaarish* (2010) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). Here is however a hero who is not very firmly rooted in his moral grounds. He might be arguing with the doctor in favour of setting the ‘Lady Macbeth’ free, but that happens only in the ‘story’ he tells as a postscript to Sophie. It sounds more like an attempt on his part to revive himself in the eyes of his ex-girlfriend (as well as the viewers). But the narrative of blindness transcends the personal conflicts of the male protagonist and embraces other characters and issues as well. First of all, the yesteryear actor Pramod Sinha represents those people who are blind not only to the obvious changes of time (he still thrives in his old days of glory) but also to betrayal from the close ones. He appears as a good human being, but a misfit in this society of crooked morality. There is blindness, on the part of the viewers in this case, to the small but crucial details, which will assume meaning only in due course of time. This might be related to our blindness to the larger human conditions due to partial sight. One cannot fathom the true depth of what is going on unless and until one is out of the loop itself. Finally, what is most significant in a thriller, there is this blindness to the possible outcomes of events which keeps the viewers permanently on the edge of their seats.

There is this particular scene in which Akash is tied to a chair along with Simi, now blindfolded and similarly tied to another chair. Their respective narratives, then, are now paused for a while.

Both seem to be tied to the regulations of a third narrative (that of the corrupt doctor) which now controls their movement. They laugh at each other's present precarious situation and vulnerability, but there has been established this strange kind of equation between the two. In fact there is more than what meets the eyes. On one hand, there is this scheming lady, now reduced to a helpless victim without being able to use her eyes; on the other hand, there is this male protagonist who, as if to follow the age-old trends of thrillers, does the daring act of freeing themselves. But the moment the lady gains back her 'eyesight', she becomes powerful and scheming once again. The eyes are no doubt the most significant factors in this game of obtaining and retaining power over the situation.

3. CONCLUSION:

The ending is some kind of wish fulfilment for the protagonist. The first narrative (i.e. Akash's) of the heteroglossia claims Akash to have rejected Dr. Swami's offer of using Simi's eyes to get back his eyesight. Nevertheless the story never comes to the full circle without the eyes of Sophie which have seen the first half of Akash's journey. Two years later she discovers Akash performing a gig at Krakow. In her gaze Akash still remains a fraud, yet her empathy is aroused for this blind man who has finally realized his dream notwithstanding all the hurdles in his life. Sophie even tells Akash he should have accepted Dr. Swami's offer to restore his sight as well as part of the reward money of ten million dollars. This sounds like a communal approval which would clear Akash of all the possible charges of deception and bluff. There is this brilliant end twist (spoilers alert) which compels the viewers to believe that this guy is still assuming blindness! This is once again unnerving, for we have to reconsider the validity of the whole story narrated by the hero. The viewers now understand in retrospection that the whole frame story has acted like a master-narrative, holding inside its womb the heteroglossia or parallel-cum-contradicting stories. The ulterior aim has been to convince Sophie, and in this process the viewers too, of Akash's larger than life narrative. All those chances and coincidences then might have been necessitated by the master-narrator to make amend for the loop holes of the sensational story.

In reality, Akash might have just got Simi killed with the help of Dr. Swami to get his lost eyesight back. Also, maybe he has just made up the entire story since Sophie had left him in disgust, early in the movie. In that case, the whole prospect of organ trading business might have been another ploy to give a serious dimension to his elaborate narrative. In any case, much like Sophie, it is the viewer who is at the receiver's end. The whole movie then reminds the viewers of the unreliability of all narratives that surround them. Even the dialogic process would only establish one narrative over the other, and not trace the true narrative at the cost of the false one. *Andhadhun* is therefore a rare kind of movie which focuses on the very process of multiple narratives confronting each other. This tends to construct the web of multidimensional 'truth' to be accessed by viewers in their own respective ways, depending on their individual capacity to watch or not-watch.

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