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www.the-criterion.com

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Fictionalized Biography of Indira Gandhi: A Close Study of *Aandhi* (1975)

Kalyanee Rajan

Assistant Professor,
Department of English
Shri Ram College of Commerce
University of Delhi.

Abstract:

Vijaya Ramaswamy raises a pertinent question in the introduction to *Biography as History: Indian Perspectives* asking why biographies in the Indian context end up being hagiographies. She brings up another valid query to the fore: whether the crucial silences in political biographies are indicative of the disturbing tendency among Indian biographers to “...express only that which is laudable and looks good...”. It is against this premise that this paper seeks to conduct a close reading of a Bollywood film *Aandhi*, released in 1975, as a fictionalized biography of India’s third and only woman prime minister Indira Gandhi (1917-1984).

Keywords: Indira Gandhi, Representation, Fictionalized biography, Indian Politics, Emergency in India, Personal History.

Vijaya Ramaswamy raises a pertinent question in the introduction to *Biography as History: Indian Perspectives* asking why biographies in the Indian context end up being hagiographies. She answers this through Ramachandra Guha’s position where Guha “...locates the problem of impoverished biographies in the obsession with idolization/iconisation that characterizes most biographies and biographers” (Ramaswamy 6). Speaking of political biographies, Ramaswamy prescribes that a biography of any political figure “needs to balance equally the personal and the political...” She brings up another valid query to the fore: whether the crucial silences in political biographies are indicative of the disturbing tendency among Indian biographers to “...express only that which is laudable and looks good...” (Ramaswamy 7). It is against this premise that this paper seeks to conduct a close reading of a Bollywood film *Aandhi*, released in 1975, as a fictionalized biography of India’s third and only woman prime minister Indira Gandhi (1917-1984). She was married to Feroze Gandhi (1912-1960). The film written, produced and directed by Gulzar, gathered immense popularity as it was thought to portray the true facets of the “iron lady” of India.

It would be useful to begin with a brief account of certain events of Indira’s life which are crucial to one’s understanding of the film. Pankaj Vohra, a reviewer of Katherine Frank’s biography of Indira Gandhi describes Frank’s take on the tenuous Indira-Feroze relationship in the biography– “Indira remained caught between the father and the husband. She, however, went over to her father because of her sense of the father’s needs, and her own needs as well because the relationship with Feroze, though not boring and banal, was antithetical finally to her sense of exquisite refinement and Feroze was not willing to submerge himself with the Nehru scheme of things” (Vohra 98).

Katherine Frank elaborates the fragility and depth of Indira's marriage:

Indira Gandhi was forty-two when she was widowed. Her husband, Feroze Gandhi, died of a heart attack at the age of forty seven in 1960. It had been a volatile marriage from the start, with long periods of estrangement followed by reconciliations and then separation again. For more than ten years before Feroze Gandhi's death, Indira Gandhi and her two sons lived with her father in the Prime Minister's House in Delhi, where she acted as Nehru's official hostess and unofficial aide and adviser...It is clear from her letters that Feroze Gandhi's death was the worst of (her) bereavements, in part because their relationship had been so troubled. Indira and Feroze Gandhi were...two people who can neither live with nor without each other and who cause each other a great deal of pain, punctuated by periods of happiness, over a span of years...Feroze Gandhi's death opened a wound that in some ways never healed. (Frank 250)

The film was released on the 4th of January 1975, a few months before the dreadful Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi which came into effect on 26th June 1975. It was banned promptly, as defamatory and casting aspersions on the leader. Speaking on the banning of *Aandhi*, Gulzar confessed, "The Emergency was on and the movie was banned in its 23rd week...We were then asked to make a few changes in the movie. It was suggested that the protagonist, i.e. Suchitraji, should declare in the film that she's a great fan of Indiraji's. So the scene was added on, to make it clear that Suchitraji isn't Indira Gandhi. And we got it passed by Indiraji's government"¹. Having been released well before the emergency, the film does not and cannot be expected to preempt the tumultuous times of the emergency and therefore has at its centre the disturbed conjugal life of a woman politician torn between her political ambitions and a yearning for domestic bliss.

Tracing the history of the flashback which is central to the structure of *Aandhi*, Gulzar explains that these came to be used with the advent of "talkie films" with which a flashback could be used where "a dialogue from the past was overlapped on the image of the present to conjure up a distant memory" (Gulzar et al. 218). The story of *Aandhi* is held together by many such long flashbacks. The present shots deal primarily with the political life of Arti Devi played by Suchitra Sen and the flashbacks unravel her personal life. For instance, as an old woman she wears her hair neatly tied into a bun throughout, whereas it is only as a young woman in the flashbacks that her long hair is seen open. This seems to reflect conformity to feminine stereotype whereby a woman must keep herself under a certain discipline if she requires public acceptance. On the other hand, the historical figure of Indira Gandhi always wore her hair short, rebelling against gender stereotypes.

The character of the husband, JK played by Sanjeev Kumar, is developed as a man of humble origins- a hotel manager by profession who writes romantic poetry. Indira's husband Feroze Gandhi was a man of letters too, a journalist by profession. The couple here, have a daughter who is seen only once, in a flashback as a three-year old, and later conveniently packed off to a hostel. Indira Gandhi had two sons who inherited her political legacy with the unchecked excesses of the younger one causing her lot of embarrassment.

¹ From "Do you have any idea of sur and taal?" How *Aandhi* got its songs."
<www.hamarforums.com/index.php?showtopic=16880>.

Arti is the daughter of a wealthy businessman, who goads her continuously to join politics. Arti has done her BA & MA in Political Science and is a qualified Oxford barrister. Indira herself went to Oxford, though she couldn't secure a degree ostensibly due to an "illness" (Gupte 187). Arti is portrayed as a woman who can't wait to get married to the man of her choice much against her father's wishes. This is reminiscent of Indira's love marriage to Feroze, a decision which was opposed by both their families (Gupte 190). Arti's father R. K. Bose, is a successful and politically active businessman who wants his daughter to enter politics thereby furthering his business. He is vehemently opposed to Arti's early marriage and that too to a socially inferior "hotel manager" with no scope for political ambitions. Pranay Gupte talks of this in his political biography of Indira saying that the 'class' barrier dividing Indira and Feroze was all too perceptible and further Nehru "did not want Indira to plunge into matrimony right away" (Gupte 190). Like the indignant Indira, Arti resents her father's hold over her personal life. This is brought out in her emphatic cry: "*Meri zindagi ko apna business mat banaiye. Main rajniti mein jaa rahi thi toh desh ki sewa ke liye, aur chod rahi hun, tho apna ghar basane ke liye*" (Tr. Don't make my life your business. I was to enter politics to serve the nation and I'm leaving it for familial life). Like Nehru, Arti's father uses his influence for refining his son-in-law; nominates him as president in a public committee, which proves to be the final straw in J.K. and Arti's wedded life. Nehru had made Feroze the director of a national daily and wanting to keep his daughter nearby, offered to start the office of the daily in Delhi itself which did not materialize as Feroze died early (Vohra 98).

The film pays a lot of attention to Arti and JK's courtship and domestic life, all shown in flashbacks, and tries hard to show the spark still alive between them after a long separation of 9 years where both have moved ahead in their respective lives. Nine years seem to suggest something akin to the nine-month period of gestation after which the couple grow mature enough to accept each other's choices and support one another. A similar fate eluded Indira though, as after brief periods of reconciliation and conjugal harmony, a "temperamentally unsuited" Feroze and Indira managed to stay apart for the better part of their lives. (Frank 250)

The film's opening sequence shows the city of Bhopal in the grip of election fever. Jeeps ply on the streets with hefty campaigning and sloganeering; clearly belonging to three different candidates whose images and election symbols- "bird / lantern / chair" are seen painted on posters wrapped around the jeeps. Flags and loudspeakers are visible everywhere as the credits start rolling. At an election rally, overlooking tall buildings, a politician Chandrasen (Om Shivpuri) is seen making an impressive speech. There are three men in Gandhi *topis* sitting on the dais, nodding their heads every time he looks at them. His speech is a nothing but propaganda against Arti Devi, his opponent. He ends his speech with a double wedged comment on her election symbol 'panchhi' (bird)-his voice menacing, "*ye panchhi kisi ke nahin hote, ye panchhi kisi ke nahin honge, ud jayenge appka daana paani aur vote lekar, aur jaakar baithenge vahin kisi raajdhani ki chaak par, aur aapko hamesha, hamesha ke liye bhookha, pyaasa chod jayenge!*" (Tr. These birds *do not* belong to anyone, these birds *will not* belong to anyone, they'll fly away taking your food, water and votes, and will go sit at the top of some capital, and they'll leave you hungry and thirsty forever and ever.)²

² From Hindi, here and elsewhere, translations are mine.

Cut to the next scene, which in stark contrast to the dusty open-air rally, the venue being an office, a frail woman with a straight gait is seen, pallu on her head, wearing a light coloured saree, descending a high staircase, her steps spelling authority. This is Arti Devi and she's wearing dark-oversized shades, it is a well furnished building as is evident from the ornate staircase, a loud orchestra playing- fast paced music, changes to rhythmic militaric drum beats as she walks on the ground, suggesting undisputed authority and power. It is this image of a powerful woman descending which haunts the mind of the viewer, presenting an immediate likeliness of Indira Gandhi. She suddenly removes her shades, thick grey hair on her head visible, hair neatly tied into a bun, flings the curtains as she enters her meeting room. Five men in Gandhi tops and wearing khadi are sitting around her. She sits on a big red coloured chair, her first sentence, significantly begins in English "*Sit down. So, opposition ne jalaa diye hamare offices?*" (Tr. So, the opposition has burnt down our offices?). This intermixing of both the languages- English and Hindi, is effectively carried on throughout the film, as if to affirm the elite ruling class at the helm. The private conversations between the couple too are interspersed with both languages.

The camera pans around her in a single shot, capturing the faces of the three men sitting on the table facing her; thereafter registering the faces of the party workers and Arti Devi by turns to give a sense of coherent discussion. Taking a firm stand while discussing the issues and setting out her priorities clearly, she does not let the party workers dominate upon her with their petty logics and conclusions. The scene shifts to a regional office where a senior and influential campaign manager Lallulal (Om Prakash) is introduced, a typical pot bellied character, shown taking a deep swig of rum. What follows is a discussion between him and a party worker. Through this dialogue, Arti Devi's strict adherence to Gandhian ideals is revealed. Lallulal makes a telling remark- "*Arti Devi Mahatma Gandhi ki cheli hain, kisi par ungli tak nahin utha sakti, haath kya uthayengi?*" (Tr. Arti Devi is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. She cannot as much as lift a finger on others, how can she lift her hand against them?). One wonders how far this was true about Indira, who ruled with an iron hand.

The second appearance of Arti is captured in a single shot, a helicopter descending from high above, landing on the ground as the party workers stand holding garlands and bouquets- Arti Devi pushes open the door, jumps out, wearing a light coloured saree, its pallu covering her head, wearing the same oversized dark shades as earlier, her steps are firm and she walks almost military steps, reaching the workers. The camera pans on the queue of the supporters as she reaches them and they try to garland her which she resolutely resists. This sequence is in keeping with the broad agenda of the film, focusing on her political acumen, trying to excessively valorize her as she travels to a sensitive area without the protective police entourage, braving the mocking crowd as they scathingly parody her in qavvali beginning -"*Arti man maanti, kehna kyun nahi maanti, paathshala me chutti ho gayi, basta kyun nahi baandhti*" (tr. Stubborn self-willed woman, why don't you heed to the advice, the game is up, why don't you pack up and leave). The unrest in the masses for a better life, their frustration with empty political promises is a direct take off from the then social scenario. Moti Gokulsing and Dissanayake explain the temper of the era, "*Cinema refracts the traditions of representation...the 1970s were a period of deep crises in India. There was urban crime, spiraling inflation, corrupt and sectarian politics- to such an extent that Mrs Gandhi, then Prime Minister, imposed a State of Emergency in 1975*" (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 46). Right after the mocking song spectacle, Arti gets injured in the mob violence that ensues, but still puts up a brave face in the press conference, not blaming her

“virodhi bhai” (tr. Opponent brothers), reiterating her faith in the people and their power to vote her out if they are genuinely against her.

Khushwant Singh recounts Indira as one who “had dictatorial tendencies, indulged in gross favoritism, overlooked corruption and systematically undermined democratic institutions” who also “manipulated and gagged” the press (Singh 79). On the other hand, if one was to look at her first speech as Prime Minister, broadcast on the All India Radio, Indira had spoken through the examples of Gandhi and Nehru, reiterating “...my own unabounded faith in the people of India...(giving) me strength and confidence” and speaks of the “indomitable spirit” and “unmistakable courage and capacity” of the Indian nation to meet challenges and withstand trials (Gandhi 9-10). Clearly, the film seems to have followed the impression favourable to and in consonance with Indira’s overt political expression.

The political storm or *Aandhi* that brews out of Arti’s personal life forms the climax of the film. Interestingly, while her opponents are given many impressive speeches throughout the film, Arti speaks only on the last day of campaigning, when her supporters have lost faith in her due to her alleged flirtations with the Hotel manager. To the utter surprise of all those present, Arti climbs up the dais of her opponent’s rally, hoary-voiced and teary-eyed as she refutes charges of illicit relations between her and JK, finally finding her voice to accept JK as her husband in full public view, demanding nothing but “*nyaay*” (justice) from the voters. Ironically, it is this impassioned reaffirmation of her chastity and submission to her wifely duties, in some ways akin to Sita’s trial by fire, which leads her to win the elections in a thumping victory. This need to conform to certain stereotypes of womanhood while representing women in Bollywood is succinctly analysed by Gokulsing and Dissanayake: “The ideal wife must be pure and an epitome of sexual fidelity... Consistent with the cultural norms pertaining to the status of women in Indian society, the honor of the family (*izzat*) is closely linked to female behavior. The need to preserve honor is expressed (in Hindi films) through ‘elaborate, codified behavior patterns that require the woman to remain secluded, confined to the domestic domain and dependent on the husband’ (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 77).

One fails to understand the exceeding haste with which Indira’s government banned a film as this- in which the political seems incidental apart from a few strong statements here and there, the rest of the film prioritizing the personal over the public, perhaps offering an insight into Indira’s troubled love-hate relationship with her husband. History affirms this fact, as about twenty four years after her husband Feroze’s death and three years after the publishing of *Midnight’s Children*, Indira sought damages for her portrayal as a husband-killer, surprisingly overlooking her hideous witch-like portrait conjured by Rushdie in the novel (Frank 251).

The last few lines of the film, snatches from a song from the courtship of Arti and JK aptly sum up their destinies as Arti’s helicopter takes off high into the sky and JK falters back to his car- “*iss mod se jaate hain, kuch sust kadam raste, kuch tez kadam raahen...*” (Tr. From this corner, turn some lazy-stepped roads and some swift-footed paths). It drives home that Feroze-J.K. chose the slow roads for their limiting lives whereas Indira-Arti belong to the swift tracks of politics and power.





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