

How Kasturba saw the Gandhi story

An excerpt from an essay on the 'Making of the Mahatma', from a new book on Shyam Benegal

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Gandhi reads out to Kasturba a letter, a still from Benegal`s `The Making of the Mahatma` featuring Rajit Kapur and Pallavi Joshi

ReFocus: The Films of Shyam Benegal

Edited by Sneha Kar Chaudhuri and Ramit Samaddar

Orient BlackSwan, 272 pages, Rs 1050

Shyam Benegal, a trailblazing auteur who successfully redefined the contours of non-commercial Hindi language cinema, is widely perceived as one of the most influential Indian filmmakers. And yet, his voluminous body of work remains relatively under-studied in contemporary film scholarship.

To help fill this critical lacuna, 'ReFocus: The Films of Shyam Benegal' undertakes a closer look at his films and shows how the auteur, over the course of his forty-year career, used cinema as a potent medium to narrate the story of a nation in continuous transition. The book attempts to be as representative as possible in its scope by choosing to examine his 'major' as well as his 'minor' cinematic ventures.

The thirteen essays in this volume explore how Benegal's films articulate his concerns about caste, class, gender, religion, and other allied social, economic, and political problems characterizing the Indian subcontinent. They offer nuanced critiques of the way Benegal's parallel cinema upholds the value of meaningful cinema as a means to create social awareness in the minds of the audience. This collection also includes a full-length interview with Benegal, which investigates his perspectives on the art of film-making and provides an analysis of his own films.

This book will interest scholars and academics studying Indian cinema, Bollywood cinema, subaltern studies, media studies, gender politics, adaptation and postcolonial studies.

Here is an excerpt from the essay on 'The Making of the Mahatma':

EXCERPT

Adapting Gandhi/Kasturba in 'The Making of the Mahatma'

By Vivek Sachdeva

Through his realist aesthetics, Shyam Benegal has made socially relevant and politically charged cinema focusing on the issues of the lower castes, women and other minority groups of India. Despite the fact that most of Benegal's films were not sponsored by the FFC and NDFC, unlike films of other filmmakers of the Indian New Wave, his work has been understood as carrying the state's modernizing and developmental agenda. He has made films to 'address the need for women's emancipation, a casteless society, an end to feudal relationship', the exploitation of the Dalits, the status of women in the Indian society and the empowerment of the downtrodden. His films are known for their 'sustained engagement with dynamics of power and powerless, domination, and subordination'. His films do not glorify India, nor do they indulge in jingoism. Rather from the vantage point of the margins, his films offer alternative imaginaries of India as a nation-(state).

Benegal offers myriad images of India as a nation-state from the point of view of the lower castes and women in his cinema. He has told stories of the lower castes and women in feudal society and has also dealt with the question of the identity of women in the wake of modernity in India. In mainstream Hindi cinema, women were portrayed as being subservient to men in most of the narratives and were given stereotypical roles such as the ideal mother, ideal wife or idealised suffering mother, or as submitting to the pressure of the dominant male gaze and voyeurism in cinema. As such, they are desired as objects. Moreover, the sexualised female body is shown as 'a sexual subject who articulates her sexuality through image, values, behavior and desires in Indian cinema'. But in Benegal's cinema, women confront Indian patriarchy, they struggle for their identity and are given agency to resist the oppressive patriarchal structure. Compared with Satyajit Ray for his masterly control over the medium, ever since 'Ankur' Benegal has narrated stories of the marginalised, oppressed and silenced sections of Indian society. Through his progressive cinema, he has questioned the existing oppressive social and political order and has lent a voice to the voiceless. Benegal, while telling stories of men in different layers of Indian society, has portrayed women sensitively in his films. In films like 'Ankur' (The Seedling, 1974), 'Nishant' (Night's End, 1975), 'Manthan' (The Churning, 1976), 'Bhumika' (The Role, 1977) and 'Mandi' (Market Place, 1983), he has focused on the problems faced by women in rural, urban and in mofussil (suburban) spaces. 'Ankur', 'Nishant' and 'Manthan' are the narratives of women's oppression and exploitation in rural spaces. 'Bhumika' is a narrative of a woman's search for identity in a male-dominated urban space and 'Mandi' portrays the challenges faced by courtesans in a small town near Hyderabad in the wake of social and economic changes.

Made in 1996, 'The Making of Mahatma' stands out for two reasons – first, it tells the story of Gandhi's stay in South Africa, which is a lesser known narrative in the popular nationalist imagination in India; second, the filmmaker has given Kasturba Gandhi's voice and point of view to the narrative while telling the story of Mahatma Gandhi, which is important from a narratological point of view. It would be erroneous to generalise that the film focuses primarily on Kasturba Gandhi – it does not, as Mahatma Gandhi enjoys centrality in the narrative – but even so, Kasturba Gandhi's portrayal in the film invites critical attention. Made immediately after the period of apartheid in South Africa, the film is based on the book 'Apprenticeship of a Mahatma' by Fatima Meer (1970), an academic and anti-apartheid writer. Immediately after the apartheid period was over, Fatima Meer approached Shyam Benegal to make a film about either Nelson Mandela or Gandhi. Shyam Benegal agreed to make a film about Mahatma Gandhi. This chapter will first discuss the relation between films and history, and second compare the representation of Kasturba Gandhi as it appears in the book to her role in the film, within the frame of adaptation studies.

Horizons of film adaptation have grown wider over a period of time. From an initial focus on the adaptation of a literary work – a novel or a play – into film, now an increasingly wide range of narrative forms, such as memoirs, autobiographies, real incidents, or the life story of a famous historical personality, are being adapted to the screen. Films based on historical personalities or their biographies tend to adapt not only the book but also history, placing history in the domain of popular culture. All kinds of writings have their own aesthetics and relationship with history. Despite the ontological differences between aesthetics and history, historical biographies narrativise history while telling the story of a historical personality. They are an important

source in postmodern historiography. Films based on the life story of famous historical personalities, which I call Historical Biopics, structure their narrative around a historical personality and thus contribute to the ever-growing narrative of history. J. Dudley Andrew's question, 'Why not treat historical films as adaptation?' and Thomas Leitch's idea of the 'adaptive nature of historiography' make a plausible argument to treat Historical Biopics as adaptations of history.

Through Historical Biopics, the filmmaker simultaneously engages with narratives at three levels – one, the narrative of the source book; two, the narrative of history; and three, the narrative of the film, which becomes the medium and the site of negotiations with earlier narratives. The tripartite model is helpful to understand the engagement between the author (of both book and film), the narrative (of both book and film) and the history. By offering a new perspective and interpretation to history, a filmmaker also writes history with a camera. Establishing a critical bond with the camera, these adaptations try to fill 'gaps, silences, absences' and complement 'patterns revealed over long periods of time'.

In this chapter, using Linda Hutcheon's ideas of adaptation as interpretation, Historical Biopics are seen as an interpretation of not only the source book, but also of history.

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