

Rethinking *Aaja Nachle*: Power, Learning, Tradition And Change

Analyzing repeat value is by its nature not something that can be done shortly after a movie's release. In 2007, of the many Indian films that I saw, only one became a part of my life: *Aaja Nachle*, directed by Anil Mehta, made under the Yashraj banner, with writing credits going to Aditya Chopra (story), Jaideep Sahni (screenplay, dialogues and lyrics for several songs) and Piyush Mishra (the final *Laila Majnu* opera). One always wonders what gives a movie the power to enthrall. And why for me and not for every viewer? Certainly, the strong well-drawn characters, the themes that resonate, the rich detail, the memorable dialogues, the beauty of the song, dance and color in *Aaja Nachle* are compelling. But why and how do they work? Characters probably come first. My five-year old granddaughter regularly asks as we watch films together, "Who are you in this story?" Each of us then chooses someone with whom to identify. The richer the film, I have noticed, the harder it becomes to limit oneself to "being" just one person.

Aaja Nachle begins with Dia (Madhuri Dixit) teaching her New York students jazz steps. A phone call from India takes her, along with her 10-year old Indian-American daughter Radha (Dalai), to the small town of Shamli, where Dia rediscovers a world she left behind over a decade before. We learn of Dia's past, how a slap from her father and the family's hasty plans for her to marry Mohan (Ranvir Shorey) did not deter her in her decision to leave family, friends and country behind and to follow (temporary) American husband Steve (Felix D'Alviella) to a new life in the U.S. We learn too of the recently deceased teacher, her guru (Darshan Zariwala) who taught her to dance, to live, to soar. Ajanta, the city-owned theater where she spent her teenage years practicing and performing along with other girls of the town, is now awaiting demolition. Promoters have convinced the city that it needs a mall, gleaming symbol of the future, not an outdoor theater, deteriorating reminder of the past. In a filmed message her teacher appeals to her from his deathbed to save Ajanta. The story that follows is in the genre of the backstage musical, somewhat reminiscent of Busby Berkeley's 1940s films, often starring Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, in which small-town folk respond to challenges at hand by putting on a musical play. Rhythm, enthusiasm and an American can-do spirit were a match to any problem. But that was then and there. *Aaja Nachle* is here and now. Busby Berkeley's films were lively and endearing, but my involvement with the characters was passing. In *Aaja Nachle* I identified deeply not only with Dia but also with Anokhi (Konkona Sen Sharma) and with the handsome Imran Pathan (Kunal Kapoor), the quietly powerful yet discerning Raja Sahib (Akshaye Khanna), the lovesick, jilted Mohan (Ranvir Shorey), and even with Dia's friend, the shrinking Najma (Divya Dutta) and, more surprisingly, with her husband Farooque (Irfan Khan), not to mention with players who, though minor, are key to the plot, e.g., the waiter, invisible man at a fashionable party, who is able to report to the troupe on the bribery that he has observed.

Samuel Goldwyn is most often credited with the familiar saying, "If you want to send a message, call Western Union." Screenwriter Jaideep Sahni echoes the mantra. Speaking with Utpal Borpujari of the *Deccan Herald*, he stressed the need to entertain, "I am not an activist, I don't have the activist's ability to raise a stink about and effect policy planning. I don't have a politician's ability to rally thousands of people behind me and bring everything to a stop to show that things are not running as I wanted them to be. I just know to tell stories and write songs."¹

¹ <http://www.deccanherald.com/Content/Oct312007/panorama2007103033233.asp>

If didactic films do tend to bore, I would argue that the best films are filled with messages, little requests for change, intelligently embedded in strong stories with engaging characters. Learning, one of life's great pleasures, goes in tandem with change. A conduit in a chain, Dia learns from her teacher, teaches in turn, learns more in the process, and by her example of continued learning, inspires others to learn. She teaches not only dance but also courage, strength and an intelligent use of power. Some of the lessons are hard – aerobics for the out of shape would-be dancers or the art of attraction, which Anokhi slowly discovers involves a studied behavioral modification. The capacity the characters show for change is one of their attractions. The jilted Mohan moves from being seen by his friends as a *jalebi*, a most innovative insult, to being honored by them, *tu bahut baRaa majnu hai, yaar*. (You are real Majnu, friend.) Dia's daughter Radha progresses from a disinterested visitor to the town, unable to speak correct Hindi, to an ardent member of the group. "I'm not leaving," she says when the players are threatened with violence. At first, Chojar Sahib (Vinay Pathak), in the eyes of his wife (Sushmita Mukherjee), is the most boring man in the world; by the end he has become a diamond. Farooque, after seeing his wife perform, curses himself for having used her as a mere tool in his business schemes. Granted, character transformation typically drives plots; it is part of a writer's stock in trade. Not all transformations, however, are equally persuasive. Realistic details bring the characters of *Aaja Nachle* to life, e.g., Dia's daughter's request to buy an air conditioner to be rid of mosquitoes or Imran Pathan's concern for looking sufficiently tough to the bullies under his command or Najma's fear and pain as she plays her accustomed role, that of the dutiful, unquestioning wife. Because the characters have taken on life, the choices they face – large and small – become our choices, their dilemmas our dilemmas.

Strength, even in tiny doses, is essential to the transformative experience that makes for a good story. The word *shakti* (strength) is feminine. It is not surprising then that Hindi cinema has given us many a heroine who personifies strength. Often she is one who says and does little but who inspires action, e.g., Vidya (Nargis) in *Shree 420* or Radha (Jaya Bhaduri) in *Sholay*. With quiet, centered force, the heroine moves wayward men to do the right thing, often later rather than sooner. Najma, Dia's childhood friend, displays this sort of strength when, in an unspoken act of rebellion against her husband's manipulation, she finally joins the dance troupe. Her act of courage is the stimulus to his change. Dia, on the other hand, is the heroine with a voice, a very sophisticated version of Basanti (Hema Malini) in *Sholay*, one might say. Very young, her strength of personality is such that she ignores her parents' will and follows her dream all the way to America. A successful immigrant, when she returns she has the power that accompanies wealth and the ease of someone at home in the wider world. In her first meeting with the ultimate decision-maker in the fate of Ajanta, MP Raja Uday Singh, Dia's haute couture clothing and proud gait give a clear message long before she speaks. Her words merely underline her sense of herself as an equal player in the power struggle that will follow. Dia sometimes oversteps her bounds, particularly as an NRI. In her 11 years' absence she has forgotten to some extent how to think local. Coming from abroad does not make her automatically right. "I'm a choreographer, a dancer," she says. "From New York," answers Raja Sahib, with understated but unmistakable sarcasm. She must relearn Shamli's rules even as she maintains the power and perspective that come with being capable of moving freely and comfortably between worlds, New York one day, Shamli the next.

Dia displays her intellectual strength again and again as she assesses situations and reacts to them swiftly. When she sees her sets being destroyed by the local thugs in the employ of the town's political boss (Akhilendra Mishra), her distress turns to pleasure as she discerns in the leader Imran Pathan her Majnu in waiting. In something of a verbal karate attack she turns his own mental weight against him, "You can read and write, can't you?" Angrily, he answers, "*kyaa bakvaas kar rahii ho tum?*" (What nonsense are you talking?) Sensing his pride to be his weak point, she continues, "You've been in plays in school? No? Something? Twinkle twinkle little star? Baa-baa black sheep?" She combines the power of body and brain. With calculatedly intrusive and disquieting body language she moves into his personal space. She then frames the debate with words of her choosing.

Dia's decision to stage *Laila Majnu* at Ajanta is hardly fortuitous. The story, based on multiple retellings of a 7th century Arab tale and the 12th century version by Nizami, is at one level an expression of the injustice that exists within a highly patriarchal social system. Greatly heightened by drama, the limits imposed on Laila's will are nevertheless analogous to the stifling constraints imposed on various women in Shamli. Mrs. Chojar expresses her frustration with her role as guardian and symbol of honor within the home: ". . . *agar maiN sans bhii luuN naa, to inkii izzat chalii jaengii kyonki hamaare ghar meN do log haiN, ye aur inkii izzat.*" (If I even take a breath, his honor will be lost because in this house there are two people: this man and his honor.) Somewhat paradoxically, this play, an evocation of the past, will take Shamli back to its roots even as it brings it forward to more progressive thinking. Blind to the everyday injustices that real women face, the townspeople nevertheless respond to Laila, a fictional woman at the mercy of her father and her husband. The filmmaker wisely cuts between the play itself and audience reactions to the *Laila Majnu* story. Very ordinary couples look touched. Powerful men have tears in their eyes. Shamli is in need of a repositioning of women. The play offers consciousness raising even as it entertains. Writer Jaideep Sahni also helped bring women interestingly to the screen in *Chak De India*. As he pointed out, "Fifty per cent of our population is women, and if you think you are going to become a world power while 50 per cent of our population does not have any means to achieve their potential, it is not practical thinking." (In an interview with Utpal Borpujari for the Deccan Herald, October 31, 2007)

Music is an essential tool in Dia's fight to save Ajanta and, not accessorially, to change a community. In a conversation with Carrie Gracie on the BBC World Service's *The Interview* neurologist Oliver Sacks discussed his book *Musicophilia*. He described the power of music to unlock responses – motor, emotional or intellectual – in patients whose brains have been impaired. Once music is learned, it becomes embodied in deeper parts of the brain from which it can well up in amazing ways even among those with severe memory loss or Parkinson's or Alzheimer's. It is a bit as though the people of Ajanta have experienced collective brain damage, not perhaps in most areas of their lives, but certainly as regards a part of their culture. A play alone would not have the power to reawaken awareness among the townspeople; music is the crucial element which ensures that they will respond, just as do Dr. Sacks' patients. Memory is below the surface, masked by their new world of shopping malls. The music which Dia brings to them has the effect of sparking Shamli folks' memories, drawing them into a deeper, richer life, and back to a part of their culture which had, for all appearances, been lost. Her guru said and she repeats, "*kalakaar ko shahr kii zarurat nahiiN. shahr ko kalakaar kii zarurat hai.*" (Art doesn't need this town; this town needs art.)

It was difficult while seeing *Aaja Nachle* not to think of another film released in the fall of 2007, *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, a documentary by Jim Brown on the 88-year old folk singer whose songs again and again over the decades have had a powerful effect on American society. Pete Seeger explains that discussing politics tends to separate people while singing, even about highly political topics, brings them together and energizes them into action. The songs and the dialogue in *Aaja Nachle* are inclusive in a way that is reminiscent of the Gandhian message in certain Manmohan Desai films: “*Hindu Muslim Sikh Issai, subhi to haiN bhai bhai.*” (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian, all are brothers.) In *Aaja Nachle* there is the more subtle *terii palkeN terii bindii terii urdu terii hindii* (your eyelids, your bindi, your Urdu, your Hindi) from the song “Show Me Your Jalwa.” More forcefully, following the death of Laila and Majnu, the couple meet in a heavenly space with the song in the background reminding that whether you believe in the Brahman Gyan, the Gita, the Bible, the Quran, or the Guru Granth Mahaan, *pahle pyaar bharii insaanii zubaan ko maano.* (First, believe in human words full of love.) Immediately before and after the death of Laila and Qais the music soars with the Sufi-like incantation “Ishq-Ishq” as dancers clad in flowing red move frenetically. This tale enters a mystical realm that other stories of thwarted love never attempt to attain. As the couple meet on a staircase climbing towards the afterlife, below in the foreground we see the Laila’s father and husband praying at the tombs of Laila and Qais. (One thinks of El Greco’s painting “The Funeral of the Conde Orgaz” in which a heavenly sphere swirls above those whose heads are bowed in prayer.) After a glimpse of a mystical union we are brought back to the world at hand with a message that connects directly to the lives of the Shamli audience . . . and to our own: what is important is human words full of love.

Following the success of the play, Dia takes a moment to speak silently with her guru. All that she has accomplished in life would be impossible without his nourishing blessings. Interestingly, in *Dor* (2006, directed by Nagesh Kukunoor) blessings are shown in a similar light. It is the loving touch of Dadi Ma which brings the young widow Meera (Ayesha Takia) from a state of total resignation to renewed life and freedom.

Disappointingly for those who have found *Aaja Nachle* to be a treasure, the film seems to have done only moderately well at the box office. Immediate success, however, is not always a guarantee of a long-lasting film. It is surprising today to read the dismissive term “flop” given categorically to a film such as Yash Chopra’s 1981 *Silsila* or to realize that Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1947), now one of the best-known, most-loved films in the U.S., did poorly at its release. One would hope that *Aaja Nachle* will fall into the category of movies to be discovered and rediscovered by successive audiences.

- Connie Haham, 2008