On the Meaning of Style: Cognition, Culture, and Visual Technique in Bimal Roy's *Sujata*

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Abstract: Perhaps the most common activity of film critics is interpretation. However, cognitive film theorists have sometimes expressed skepticism over the value of interpretation, perhaps particularly with respect to film style. In connection with this, cognitive critics have tended to stress the function of style in facilitating the communication of narrative information. The purpose of this article is to clarify what constitutes the interpretation of style. The opening section discusses what prompts interpretation and what its main purposes are. The article then considers how style may be understood as contributing to those purposes, beyond conveying narrative information. The second section goes on to illustrate these points through an examination of Bimal Roy's *Sujata*. This section argues that Roy uses staging in depth and graphic matches to advance a critique of untouchability. In formulating this critique, Roy draws on culturally particular ideas from Hindu metaphysics, integrating these with visual techniques that rely on universal human interests and propensities. The analysis of Roy's film illustrates how a cognitive interpretation of style might be developed. It also suggests that cognitive and cultural analyses may be integrated in ways that are productive for our understanding and appreciation of individual works.

Keywords: Bimal Roy, film interpretation, film style, graphic match, staging in depth, *Sujata*, untouchability in film

Understanding Style

It goes without saying that stylistic techniques may serve different functions in different films. To say that a given stylistic technique is functional in a given film is to say that the technique bears on one or another purpose of the film. David Bordwell (1997) has rightly stressed the communication of narrative information as one primary function of standard stylistic practices. Bordwell's argument seems indisputable, both generally and in its details. A narrative film that fails to communicate crucial narrative information—by, say, mis-

directing our attention through idiosyncratic framing—will probably fail as a narrative film. On the other hand, certain categories of film seem to be more narrowly concerned with narrative information than others. Classical Hollywood cinema would appear to be the exemplar of a system of visual style designed to communicate narrative information as unobtrusively as possible. In contrast, at least from the 1950s—then, with increased speed in the 1960s and later—Bombay cinema developed a sometimes rather flamboyant set of stylistic techniques that often do not appear to facilitate narrative information. But, of course, this does not mean that Bollywood or other evidently non-narrative techniques are without a function.

All major traditions of literary theory and poetics suggest that there are two main purposes of verbal art (purposes that clearly may be extended to film)—the elicitation of emotion and what we might refer to as the communication of themes.[1] Narrative is the primary means by which these are accomplished. But, as discussed in this article, it is not the only means; stylistic techniques may have more direct ways of eliciting emotion or suggesting thematic concerns as well. In other words, style may contribute to accomplishing these purposes without being entirely subordinated to narrative. In narrative films, these other uses of style are usually coordinated with the story. The point is simply that, even in those cases, they are often more than just a means of communicating narrative information.

I take it that the general meaning of emotion elicitation is fairly transparent. The thematic purposes of literary or film art, however, may be less familiar, at least under that heading. The communication of themes comprises the direct or indirect conveyance of general ideas, typically ethical or socio-political ideas, that are consequential in the world of the author or reader and not merely that of the characters. These include not only "the moral" of a story, but complex problems and sometimes highly nuanced responses to those problems. In this rather broad sense of the word "theme," themes are commonly the primary focus of our interpretive activity in examining films. Interpretation applies most obviously to explicit thematic statements made in the course of a film, such as Raj's speech about ending homelessness at the conclusion of *Shree 420*. In addition, the bearing of interpretation on certain narrative features—emotionally intense incidents, causally enchained sequences of events, outcomes of plot trajectories—is also clear. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* ends with the two protagonists fleeing their husbands and taking refuge in a Muslim shrine. This resolution—particularly in conjunction with the immediately preceding re-enactment of part of the *Rāmāyaṇa*—is the sort of thing that fairly obviously calls out for interpretation.

But what about style? Clearly, style bears on interpretation insofar as it communicates story information. But, in that case, our interpretation remains an interpretation of the narrative. Are there other elements of style that have

interpretable meaning? It has certainly been the case that film critics have been willing to interpret technique. But the excesses of identifying, say, a "cut" in editing with castration fantasies are, of course, the sort of thing cognitivists have in mind when they at times repudiate interpretation as an intellectually frivolous activity. I do not believe that such writers are repudiating interpretation generally, however. Indeed, they practice interpretation themselves. Rather, they are rejecting what sometimes appears to be the substitution of free association for well-supported inference.

But just what would count as well-supported inference in the case of style? To have some sense of how to answer this question, we need to consider what leads us to undertake interpretation in cases where our primary interest is in understanding the work at hand. We are prompted to engage in interpretation for understanding when we are faced with some intentional phenomenon (i.e., something someone has said or done) that requires explanatory inference (specifically, a sort of explanatory inference that makes reference to reasons). Of course, this simply shifts the question to—in what circumstances do we feel that some intentional phenomenon requires explanatory inference? Generally, we undertake explanatory inference when faced with some event or complex of relations that violates our default expectations, including tacit views regarding the likelihood of such an event or complex occurring by chance. We find ourselves particularly impelled toward interpretation when the event or complex is emotionally consequential.[2]

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This violation may be experienced spontaneously. However, it may also be the result of heightened attentional scrutiny of the sort engaged in by critics. "Problematizing" a text is often seen as one task of criticism. When aimed at understanding, this is largely a matter of leading readers to focus attention on properties of the work that are unlikely or anomalous in a way that bears on a specific, developing interpretation. In some cases, these properties may already have affected viewers' responses, and thus been encoded by them, without having become the object of self-conscious awareness. Then we might say that criticism, by drawing our attention to such properties, helps us to understand our response to a work. In other cases, these properties may have escaped encoding by most viewers—thus gone unexperienced. Then we might say that criticism enhances or qualifies our response, not only expanding our self-conscious comprehension of the work, but also altering our experience of it.

In connection with both conditions for interpretation, we may distinguish between automatic, undisrupted processing and effortful or elaborated inference (roughly what hermeneuticians refer to as understanding and explica-

tion, respectively). The distinction is not solely phenomenological. Automatic processing may operate primarily through sensory cortex and other specialized areas, such as perisylvian cortex for language. Anomalies may be marked by changes in electrical activity, such as the well-known negative peak at 400 milliseconds for semantic anomalies and the positive wave at 500 milliseconds for syntactic anomalies (Osterhout, Wright, and Allen forthcoming). Alternatively, anomalies—or contradictions among systems or processing outputs—may be identified by activation in anterior cingulate cortex (see, for example, Carter et al. 1998). Such anomalies appear to trigger a shift to dorsolateral prefrontal processes (MacDonald et al. 2000), thus at least somewhat elaborated and potentially effortful working memory operation (see, for example, LeDoux and Phelps 2008: 169 on working memory and executive function). In short, this appears to be a neurologically real and consequential distinction.

Consider a case of a very minimal interruption in automatic processing, one that involves a simple shift to a prespecified alternative. Donald Hoffman points out that our visual system, as it operates in the ordinary world, is very sensitive to recurring patterns. We tend to construe those patterns as nonaccidental and as having a "common origin" (Hoffman 1998: 59). As Hoffman explains, "Suppose two curves are parallel in an image. Then you will . . . see them as parallel curves in 3D space" (59). Hoffman goes on to ask, "How likely is it that two random curves in space will happen to be parallel?" He answers that "the probability is precisely zero." As a result, we see these as "related curves, generated by the same cause or process" (59). What Hoffman does not note is that, if we understand the parallelism to be intentional, then we will not only spontaneously attribute a cause or common origin, but interpret a *meaning* for the cause, a reason why the person made those patterns.

Hoffman's example concerns parallel curves in visual space. As such, it suggests why graphic matches can have consequences for our interpretive inferences regarding the film.[3] We subsume matched shots, like parallel curves, under a common structure, attributing a common origin to that recurring pattern. In addition, we view that origin as open to interpretive inference in terms of intentional selection.

I should note that, here and below, by "intention," I do not necessarily mean anything that the filmmaker has explicitly formulated to him- or herself. Minimally, I refer to aspects of the psychological response of the filmmaker that led him or her to have the sense that a particular property of the film is "right"—a particular plot element, a lighting technique, a certain mise-en-scène. This holds even when he or she cannot articulate why this property is "right." Indeed, the filmmaker's unarticulated sense of rightness is, in effect, a central part of what the critic explains in interpretation, even if the critic does not typically put things in quite this way. This sort of critical undertaking

is particularly important in cases where the feeling of the filmmaker is or may be shared by other viewers.[4]

Though the example of parallel curves is appropriate for pointing toward the compositional similarity of graphic matches, its apparently disinterested abstractness may be misleading. Again, we are particularly sensitive to emotion elicitors. In addition, we are particularly likely to engage in interpretation when it comes to emotion elicitors that are connected with other people.

Here, as elsewhere, emotion motivates us—and at least some degree of motivation is necessary to sustain interpretive effort. The primary examples of emotion elicitors connected with social interaction are other people's emotion expressions—particularly facial gestures, hand and arm movements, posture, bodily orientation, and bodily motion. A graphic match involving one of these elements is likely to excite our interpretive interests with particular force—in part due to our experience of our own bodies mirroring[5] the expressions of the character.

Of course, our interpretations are not confined to the emotion expressions of isolated individuals. Indeed, we seem to be particularly interested in interpreting interpersonal situations and the ways those situations may produce emotions. One of the primary ways in which we understand people's emotional attitudes toward one another is through the ways in which they situate themselves relative to one another in space. Their distance from one another, line of sight, postural orientation, are all matters that we interpret, for they manifest attitudes to one another and emotional responses to those attitudes (or to some inference about those attitudes, whether accurate or not).

This too has obvious bearing on cinematic technique, and its interpretation. First, the physical proximity, orientation, accessibility of characters to one another is a product of the staging of those characters. Second, our sense of those features is a function of the way in which that staging is shot—through framing, depth of field, and so forth.

There are, of course, other interpretable aspects of film technique. This article concentrates on two techniques—the graphic match and staging in depth. However, these should serve to illustrate points about style and interpretation that have a much more general scope. In discussing these techniques, the article focuses on Bimal Roy's 1959 film, *Sujata*. Of many possible choices, Roy's film is apt because it extensively uses staging in depth and graphic matches for both thematic exposition and emotional effect. Treating Roy's film has further advantages as well. Roy's thematic concerns are deeply embedded in Indian culture and history. Thus an exploration of this film not only illustrates the compatibility of formal interpretation with a cognitive approach to film. It also illustrates the compatibility of cognitive and cultural analyses, which are too often seen as contradictory. Finally, it is, in my view, one of the masterpiecs of Hindi cinema. But it is underdiscussed and under-

appreciated. A discussion of the stylistic and philosophical nuances of Roy's film may help to alter this situation as well.

The Emotional Metaphysics of Technique in *Sujata*

Sujata is a film about untouchability. Untouchability is a practice within the Hindu caste system. It involves segregating groups of people as "polluted"— for example, in connection with the hereditary occupation of handling corpses. The segregation includes literal prohibitions on physical contact. Though forbidden by the Indian constitution, untouchability continued to be a problem. The 1955 "Untouchability (Offences) Act" sought to address these problems. However, in 1959, one observer stated that, "The practice of Untouchability continues unabated. . . . The provisions of the Untouchability (Offences) Act are being disregarded on a large scale" (Galanter 1972: 262, quoting the chief secretary of the state of Uttar Pradesh). A particular focus of concern was marriage, for, as Chandresekhar explains, "a major reactionary prop of the traditional caste system was its inherent ban on intercaste marriages" (1972: xxvi). This was addressed in the 1954 "Special Marriage Act."

Roy, along with his cinematographer, Kamal Bose, uses staging in depth to give us a feeling of the physical isolation of his heroine, Sujata, from the larger community. Graphic matches allow him to identify her with nature, and thus to illustrate what is in effect a metaphysical argument against caste hierarchies. Specifically, Roy draws on Hindu metaphysics to suggest that all of us are ultimately unified in brahman or godhead, a single, spiritual source that is manifest in the merely apparent diversity of nature. Given this, it makes no sense to distinguish one person as low caste and another as high caste. Low caste and high caste are ultimately the same—the same as one another; the same as God; the same as nature. The point is not new to Roy. It is found even in ancient Hindu scriptures. However, it is presented with particular emotional force in Roy's film—a force inseparable from the film's highly interpretable visual techniques.

Sujata is the story of a girl born into the caste of untouchables, but raised by a Brahmin family.[6] At the beginning of the story, we are introduced to Upendranath Chowdhury, an engineer. There is a cholera outbreak in a village at one of his work sites. The infant Sujata is orphaned during the outbreak and the villagers, not knowing what to do, bring her to the Chowdhurys, explaining her caste status. The Chowdhurys, who already have an infant daughter, Rama, reluctantly allow their servant to take care of the child. Initially, they plan to give her up for adoption to a member of her own caste. When that fails, they decide to send her to an orphanage. But that plan too does not succeed. Ultimately, she grows up in their family, never entirely rejected, but also never fully accepted (e.g., unlike Rama, she is not given a full education). Eventually, she meets and falls in love with Adhir. However, two problems arise.

First, she fears that Adhir will reject her because of her caste. Second, she discovers that the Chowdhurys plan to marry Rama to Adhir. Faced with these obstacles, feeling that she should not go against her parents' wishes or block the happiness of her sister, Sujata decides to break off her relations with Adhir. Nonetheless, when Mrs. Chowdhury learns that Adhir and Sujata are in love, she denounces Sujata for trying to seduce Adhir. This leads to an accident in which Mrs. Chowdhury loses a great deal of blood and needs a transfusion. Doctor Sangvi tests the blood of everyone in the family and discovers that the only one with the proper blood type is Sujata. Sujata offers her blood. When Mrs. Chowdhury recovers, she realizes that she was mistaken about Sujata. The film ends with Sujata's marriage to Adhir.

Bimal Roy was a socially progressive filmmaker who set out to deal with a series of social issues in his films.[7] Indeed, for almost every one of his films, he appears to have determined, not only what political issue he would treat, but how he would enhance that treatment and intensify its emotional effects through the visual style and sound of the film. In the case of *Sujata,* his primary goal was to give the viewer an almost visceral sense of what it is like to be treated as an untouchable. To communicate this, he emphasized the literalness of not touching. This is, of course, the central prescription for orthodox upper caste behavior toward untouchables (or Dalits). For example, upper castes are supposed to stay far enough away that they do not even have contact with the shadow of a Dalit. Roy stressed the physical isolation of Sujata both through the development of plot events and through mise-en-scène, especially staging in depth. Beyond communicating this sense of isolation, Roy criticized the entire idea of untouchability. To do this, he did not take up European ideas. Rather, he established his criticism based on Hindu tradition, drawing specifically on Vedāntism. As already noted, the thematic argument of the film is roughly that, if all individual souls are identical with the single, absolute brahman, then it makes no sense to refer to one individual as upper caste and another as lower caste. Caste divisions must themselves be as illusory as individual identity. Roy communicates this idea in part through dialogue and in part through the use of graphic matches, the establishment of patterns to which we "assign . . . a common origin," to use Hoffman's phrase (1998: 59)—in this, as in other communicative cases, a reason or meaning for the statistically unlikely pattern.

Sujata's untouchability is communicated to the viewer from the moment of her introduction. Neither Upendra nor his wife holds the baby when she is brought to their home. Indeed, it is many days before Upendra touches the child at all. When he does, his wife remarks on it disapprovingly. She only touches the child when Upendra tricks her into doing so. One of the most powerful scenes in the film occurs when an ultra-orthodox "aunt" visits their home. Mistaking her for Rama, the aunt picks up Sujata, fondling her playfully. When Upendra tells her that the girl is an untouchable, the aunt literally

throws the child away. The servant catches her. It is fortunate that she is there, otherwise we cannot be sure that anyone other than the servant would have been willing to save the girl. There could hardly be a more graphic representation of the abandonment of a child by her caretakers. It is difficult to imagine any normal human being watching this scene—including people with the strongest convictions about caste—and not feeling an immediate, protective impulse toward the child, specifically an impulse to hold her, the precise opposite of the impulse to isolate her from all touch as an object of disgust.

There are other scenes in the film that present the issue of touching in this direct, narrative way. However, for our purposes, the crucial scenes are those that use stylistic techniques, relying particularly on the processing of visual patterns and emotion cues. To some extent, this is the case with Roy's repeated close ups of hands, specifically hands gesturing in emotionally expressive ways.[8] The reason for Roy's focus on hands is obvious. We use hands to touch. An untouchable is someone to whom others do not extend their hands. For example, early in the film, the Chowdhurys decide to send Sujata to an orphanage. Sujata refuses to go and runs to her mother. Mrs. Chowdhury stands stiffly against the bed. A close up shows her hand tightly gripping the bed frame. The emotion is clear. She is struggling against her inclination to embrace Sujata. Finally, she does release her hand to caress the girl's hair. Years later, Sujata asks her mother why she is treated differently, why some people will not accept tea when she serves it to them. At first, her mother refuses to answer. When she tries to walk away, Sujata grasps her hand and demands an answer. Mrs. Chowdhury finally tells her that she is untouchable. A close up shows Sujata releasing her mother's hands, recoiling from the touch she has imposed on her mother. In each case, the forbidding of touch suggests a more general deprivation of human contact, a deprivation all the more affecting in the context of mother/child relations.

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Roy's most striking visual means of establishing this human isolation is through mise-en-scène. Specifically, Roy repeatedly uses staging in depth to remove Sujata from her family and other members of society, isolating her either in a close foreground or a distant background. The technique of staging in depth allows us to see the distance. It makes that distance, and its emotional consequences, salient. One of the most striking instances of this occurs on the evening that Sujata arrives at the Chowdhury home. Mrs. Chowdhury lies on a bed, curled around the baby Rama (Figure 1). She caresses her and sings a lullaby. As Rama falls asleep, the baby Sujata begins to cry. Mrs. Chowdhury gets up and walks to the window. She has decided that she will sing to Sujata as well. But the difference is striking. We have already seen a shot of Sujata, a tiny infant alone in a huge bed (Figure 2). Now

Figure 1. Mrs. Chowdhury sings to Rama.

Figure 2. Baby Sujata alone in another room.

Figure 3. Mrs. Chowdhury sings to the untouchable Sujata from a distance.

we look past Mrs. Chowdhury, through the window of Rama's room, across a space to another window, through which we see the baby Sujata (Figure 3). Sujata's isolation is painfully evident. In the simplest terms, if something were to happen to Sujata—for example, if she were to roll over toward the edge of the bed—it does not seem possible to get from where we are (with Mrs. Chowdhury) to where she is, at least not in time to prevent her from falling. Here as elsewhere, the technique functions both thematically and emotionally.

Another instance of this sort occurs when Sujata is standing in the foreground outside the sick room where the doctor is examining her mother (Figure 4). In the background, through the door, we see everyone else. The shot physically divides the scene into two spaces—the shared space of the family, and an exterior space, outside that of the family. The disjunction of the two spaces is enhanced by the fact that Sujata is not only outside the door, she is partially concealed from the family by a curtain. Similar scenes recur repeatedly in the film. For example, Sujata cannot enter into the main celebration of her sister's birthday. She is kept just far enough away to, in effect, prevent her

Figure 4. Sujata physically removed from her family.

shadow from polluting any of the guests. Thus, at the beginning of the party, we look past her, standing at the doorway, into the room where everyone else is beginning the birthday celebration.

A particularly powerful use of staging in depth comes toward the end of the film when Sujata is apparently rejecting Adhir permanently. She is in the left foreground, looking off-camera to the left; Adhir is near the door at the back right. He moves around the far plane as they speak and she sits down, still in the foreground with her face turned away from him. Initially, Sujata is tough, insisting that he should forget her and marry Rama. But eventually her misery over these events begins to break through and she asks Adhir to forgive her. She tries to explain that she cannot do something that will hurt her parents or make them unhappy. But Adhir has already left, and Upendra has entered the room from his wife's sickbed. This is, of course, a plot device. It allows Upendra to learn about Sujata's devotion to him and his wife. It allows the reconciliation of the immediately following scene. But it also heightens our sense of Sujata's utter aloneness, the literal and metaphorical distance that separates her from everyone else.

The family reconciliation is the precise opposite of this. Just after this scene, Upendra has Sujata enter her mother's sick room. Mrs. Chowdhury draws her down to the bed and embraces her. Their embrace in a single visual plane contrasts starkly with the preceding scene, intensifying the viewer's emotion through the sharp change. It also inverts the early scene in which Mrs. Chowdhury caressed Rama in her bed, but would only sing to Sujata across two windows.

Again, Roy not only aims to convey a feeling for the isolation of untouchables, through an almost physical identification with their condition in—or, rather, outside—the larger society. He also sets out to criticize the idea of untouchability. He does this through several means. Perhaps most obviously, there is a scientific response to the idea of caste. Early in the film, he has a priest assert that modern science has shown that untouchables emit a toxic gas. The idea is mocked by Upendra, but it is only at the end that we receive a scientific rebuttal of this "scientific racist" form of caste prejudice. This occurs when Dr. Sangvi announces that the only match to the blood type of the Brahmin wife is that of the untouchable. The film thus directly responds to the racist idea that different groups—here, different castes—have different "blood." The subsequent transfusion is also a daring violation of caste taboos. If one should avoid even the shadow of an untouchable, clearly one should not mix up an untouchable's blood with one's own blood. But, far from disaster, the result is Mrs. Chowdhury's survival.

Roy also makes repeated political and, indeed, nationalist appeals against untouchability. He does this primarily by references to Mahatma Gandhi and, to a lesser extent, Rabindranath Tagore. Gandhi's picture is ubiquitous in the

film. For example, when the aunt is railing against the presence of an untouchable in the Chowdhurys' home, she is seated below a photograph of Gandhi, a photograph that reminds the viewer of Gandhi's work against untouchability. In the middle of the film, Rama takes part in a production of a play by Tagore that treats the Buddhist rejection of caste in general and untouchability in particular. Adhir recounts part of the plot to Sujata while standing beside a mural of Gandhi's life. He goes on to tell a story about Gandhi adopting an untouchable girl. When Adhir telephones Sujata to explain his love, he stands below photographs of Gandhi and Tagore. Finally, when Sujata learns that she is an untouchable, she leaves the Chowdhury house and ends up beside the Gandhi mural. As she recalls how her mother told her she was untouchable and called her a burden, Roy cuts to the representation of Gandhi's face. There is a storm and a drop of rain has blown onto the image. It rolls down his cheek like a teardrop. The thematic point is too obvious to require elaboration.

This last example involves a sort of graphic match, paralleling Sujata's tearful and rain-drenched face with that of Gandhi. As has already been indicated, Roy makes extensive use of graphic matches in order to communicate his opposition to caste discrimination, both intellectually and emotionally. However, this particular case is unusual in the film. Most of the graphic matches do not involve a political appeal, but a metaphysical one. Specifically, Roy's primary case against untouchability is not a matter of science or politics, but of Hindu thought. Untouchability is, of course, observed as a part of Hindu tradition. Roy's point is that it is profoundly inconsistent with at least certain aspects of that tradition.

In the course of the film, Roy implicitly takes up one version of Vedāntic thought—Absolute Monism. Due to space restrictions, this article cannot go into a detailed discussion of this philosophical system. However, it is important to note a few key points. First, we may think of the fundamental Upaniṣadic or, equivalently, Vedāntic principle as "ātman is brahman," which is to say, every individual soul (ātman) is ultimately identical with godhead (brahman). Mainstream Vedāntism asserts that all difference—thus all matter as well as all spiritual individuality—is māyā or illusion. This already poses a problem for caste. Indeed, that problem is repeatedly articulated in the Upaniṣads themselves. For example, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states that "All these—the priestly power [or the essence of Brahmins, members of the highest caste], the royal power [or the essence of Kṣatriyas, the second caste], worlds, gods, beings, the Whole—all that is nothing but this self [ātman]" (Olivelle 1996: 29; on the alternative translation, found within the square brackets, see 306). It goes on to explain that when a person realizes "the self," then "an outcaste is not an outcaste, a pariah is not a pariah" (61).

Outside mainstream Vedāntism, a number of Hindu philosophical schools derive from the Upaniṣads and affirm the identity of ātman and brahman, but

do not view the material world as māyā. Absolute Monism is one of these "realist" schools. To understand Absolute Monism, however, it is helpful to understand a third school of Hindu metaphysics, Sāṁkhya. As Grimes summarizes, this "school professes dualistic realism with . . . two eternal realities," "puruṣa" or spirit and "prakṛti" or nature (1996: 283). It accepts the existence of prakṛti/nature (i.e., it does not count prakṛti as māyā or illusion). However, it sharply distinguishes between puruṣa and prakṛti, viewing the two as entirely separate.

Absolute Monism follows Sāṁkhya in accepting the reality of prakṛti, thus the material world. However, it opposes Sāṁkhya with respect to the relation between puruṣa and prakṛti. Specifically, Absolute Monists insist that puruṣa and prakṛti are two aspects of the same ultimate reality. As B. N. Pandit explains, for Absolute Monists, the ultimate is "vibrant in nature and . . . actively engaged in . . . manifestation" (1997: 6). Because nature is a manifestation of spirit, "diversity [thus, nature] is not considered to be an illusion." But neither is it entirely separate from spirit, something from which the spiritual aspirant should separate himself or herself. Rather, "A perfect yogin . . . sees one Absolute God in all diversity and unity" (6). In short, puruṣa manifests itself as prakṛti and prakṛti is puruṣa as an object for itself. In keeping with this, Absolute Monists often characterize mokṣa or spiritual liberation as a recognition of the ultimate unity, not only of all individual souls, but of all spirit and nature as well. The mistaken belief in difference is a matter of "avidyā" or ignorance. Put differently, from an Absolute Monist perspective, the material world or nature is not māyā. Rather, māyā appears in the supposed ultimate nature of differences—among individual souls, between puruṣa and prakṛti, between reality and materiality.

The identity of puruṣa and prakṛti is sometimes given mythic—even narrative and specifically romantic—form by the identification of the god Śiva with puruṣa and the associated goddess, Śakti or Pārvatī, with prakṛti. As Pandit explains, Śiva represents "the comparatively static aspect of changelessness," thus the puruṣa of Sāṁkhya. In contrast, Śakti represents "the dynamic aspect that results in the manifestation of all creation and its infinitely diverse activities" (1997: 66), thus prakṛti. In this context, the identity of puruṣa and prakṛti may be represented as the unity of Śiva and Pārvatī, sometimes as sexual union, sometimes as the ardhanārīśvara or divine androgyne. The usual associations make puruṣa male and prakṛti female. However, the ultimate identity of the two principles means that the goddess may equally be spirit and the god may equally be nature.

All this has obvious implications for caste divisions. If the difference between divine and non-divine is ultimately māyā and belief in such difference is avidyā, it is impossible to see caste difference as anything other than māyā and the acceptance of caste hierarchies as anything other than avidyā. In

keeping with this, Śiva and the Goddess are regularly associated with untouchables and graphically represented as caṇḍālas (the "paradigmatic," corpse-handling untouchables [Doniger and Smith 1991: 317 and 242]), living, like caṇḍālas, at the cremation grounds (McDermott 2001: 74–75, 126, and 163). Moreover, some Śaivite spiritual texts (i.e., texts in the tradition of Śiva devotion, often associated with Absolute Monism) explicitly forbid discrimination on caste grounds. For example, the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* refers disparagingly to spiritual aspirants who believe that an "an untouchable" is "low" and therefore prevent untouchables from entering into the "family" (*kula*) of spiritual practice. In fact, it is these aspirants, not the untouchables, who are "truly low" and who will be sent "to the lowest place" (in O'Flaherty 1988: 137; see also Avalon 1963: 8.191–95).

In the course of *Sujata,* Roy suggests an identification of Sujata with both puruṣa or spirit and with prakṛti or nature. For the most part, he indicates the former through dialogue and the latter through mise-en-scène and editing. These links are most fully developed in connection with Sujata's relation to Adhir, who is himself partially linked with prakṛti. This, in turn, recalls the common romantic emplotment of Absolute Monism, in which true spiritual realization is identified with romantic union. In addition to dialogue and film technique, there is one important allusive connection here. As has already been noted, Rama is involved in the production of a play by Rabindranath Tagore. The play concerns a young untouchable woman and the viewer is clearly supposed to connect her with Sujata. That young woman's name is *Prakṛti*.

Roy begins to imply these thematic concerns right from the moment we are introduced to the adult Sujata. Sujata is on the roof, folding the laundry. We first see only her silhouette against a light sari hanging from the line. She pulls the cloth down quickly and we have our first sight of Nutan as Sujata. The sequence is suggestive. Most obviously, the silhouette calls to mind the prohibition on the shadow of the untouchable. No less significant, the cloth blocks our view of Sujata herself. It thereby suggests the veil or curtain that is a standard image of māyā. In combination, the two symbolic associations of the scene—regarding untouchability and māyā—perhaps begin to hint that caste itself is illusory, that we are concerned with shadows because we see the world through the veil of māyā.

The connection between Sujata and nature is first suggested clearly in a scene after her mother tells her that she is an untouchable and that she has been a burden to her family. Sujata is deeply hurt by this revelation. As a storm begins, she passes out from the Chowdhury house. We see her only in silhouette, as if she has been reduced to a shadow by her mother's statement that she is so "low caste that people shun [her] shadow"[9] (Figure 5). More important for our analysis, the parallel between her state and the state of nature is direct and unequivocal in this scene.

Figure 5. Sujata, a shadow, leaving home for the Gandhi memorial, after learning that she is untouchable.

Specifically, features that express her emotional condition are given close correlates in nature. Broadly speaking, Sujata fights back tears as rain pours from the skies, and, as she calms down, the storm ends. In between, Roy uses a graphic match of the sort that will characterize much of the rest of the film. He gives us a close up of Sujata's right hand, twisting the edge of her sari. This recalls the close-up of her mother's right hand, twisting against the bed frame. It also recalls the close-up of her and her mother's hands just after Sujata learned that she was born untouchable. More generally, it reminds us of touching and the state of an untouchable as someone who is forbidden from touching or being touched. Roy cuts from the twisting of Sujata's wet fingers to the twisting of leaves in the rain. The suggestion is that the two are parallel. In short, Sujata's distress is directly the distress of nature.

Soon after this scene, Sujata meets Adhir for the first time. She is gardening and is introduced as someone who makes flowers bloom. Here, her connection with nature is indicated, even if its significance is not transparent at this point. The metaphysical resonances of the relation between Sujata and Adhir are, however, suggested by a subsequent scene in which Adhir is clearly daydreaming about Sujata. When a friend asks what he is thinking about, Adhir replies, "Myself."

At their second meeting, Sujata is gardening again. We see her among the plants almost as if she were inseparable from them. At this point, it is not clear that we are dealing with metaphysical themes. The connection with nature could be much more general. The dialogue between Sujata and Adhir, their first dialogue alone, changes this. Specifically, Adhir introduces the topic of their qualities or guṇas. In Sāṁkhya and elsewhere, the guṇas are the elementary constituents of prakṛti. Moreover, the Hindu conception of divinity distinguishes between manifest divinity, which is "saguṇa" or "with guṇas," and unmanifest, absolute divinity, which is "nirguṇa" or "without guṇas." Adhir tells Sujata something that, literally, makes no sense, but is thematically very resonant. "Your best guṇa [quality]," he tells her, "is that you have no guṇas." He is claiming that she is defined by the absence of guṇas. But this is precisely to say that she is puruṣa or, equivalently, that she is the nirguṇa divinity, the absolute, brahman. The implication for the audience is clear—Sujata, like everyone, is the absolute. Indeed, the same point holds for all untouchables. Given this, the idea and practice of untouchability must be senseless. To say that we must isolate someone else is equivalent to saying that we must isolate ourselves and that we must isolate God. If the point is not already evident, Sujata adds the parallel observation, telling Adhir that he possesses all the guṇas. In short, he is prakṛti; he is divinity as saguṇa.

The remainder of the scene is filled with graphic matches identifying Sujata with nature. For example, when Adhir expresses his affection, she withdraws shyly and Roy cuts to leaves that droop. When he departs, she peeks around a tree, like the blossom of a creeper extending from the trunk. The joy on her face is paired with bird calls on the sound track, then matched with flowers. She goes forward, then turns back; Roy cuts to foliage moving back and forth in the wind. The scene goes on at great length. The links between Sujata and prakṛti in this sequence seem to be unequivocal. In keeping with Hoffman's research, we readily encode the recurring patterns and construe them as related. The dialogue about the guṇas allows us to understand that the common origin of these patterns is in the identity of Sujata (or any of us) with prakṛti—an identity that, in Absolute Monism, is also an identity with puruṣa. Thus Sujata is not only puruṣa and nirguṇa divinity, but, necessarily, prakṛti and saguṇa divinity as well.

The next meeting of Sujata and Adhir continues this thematic and emotional development. Excluded from her sister's birthday party, Sujata goes outside. She is followed by Adhir. In the subsequent conversation, Adhir asks an obvious question about Sujata's birthday. Sujata's response is, in one sense, a fairly straightforward statement that, as she is adopted, no one has kept track of her birthday. But, at the same time, it is a highly resonant response, which strongly suggests her association with both puruṣa and prakṛti.

Sujata explains that the day she was born is "Lost in darkness." It is something "No one knows."

Following this exchange, Adhir touches Sujata. The significance of this, for the developing romance and for our sense of her physical isolation, is obvious. At this point, we suspect that Adhir does not know about her caste status. Our response is, therefore, almost necessarily ambivalent. It is a moment when Sujata is not physically isolated. But we cannot be sure that Adhir will touch her again when he learns about her birth. The shots that follow are pervaded by graphic matches that serve, once more, to identify Sujata with nature. When Adhir touches her, she shivers, and we cut directly to leaves quivering.

When they meet again, Adhir expresses his love for Sujata and a passing boatman sings, "if you were a tree, I would be a creeper." The image is a common one in Indian love poetry. Its importance here, however, is that it further connects both Adhir and Sujata with nature.

Not long after this meeting, Sujata learns that her parents plan to wed Rama to Adhir. After hearing this, Sujata walks up the stairs to her room. We see her, but we also see her shadow, sharp and prominent on the brightly lit wall. When she reaches the top of the staircase, the telephone rings. It is Adhir. Sujata says that she is breaking off their relationship. Here, we see an interpretable aspect of lighting combined with mise-en-scène. Having Sujata strongly lit from an unoccupied room off-screen might seem a peculiar choice if we do not link it with the shadow falling between her and the telephone, thus between her and Adhir.

Figure 6. Sujata as a vine in the trellis.

The next day, Adhir comes to meet Sujata again. She is, once more, in the garden. She walks away from him, placing her arms on the limbs of the tree, as if mimicking the creeper of the song. She finally tells him that she is untouchable. Tears roll down her cheek. We cut to water dripping from a leaf. She then walks to a thick cluster of plants. Roy films her and Adhir through the foliage as if they are part of it. She proceeds to the trellis, pushing her fingers between the slats, like the shoots of a vine (Figure 6). At the end, she says that she is a withered flower. Thus in the scene where she announces that she is an untouchable, Sujata is insistently identified with prakṛti, through graphic matches and mise-en-scène, as well as dialogue. Once again, that identification makes the very idea of untouchability absurd, for it entails that either no one is untouchable, or everyone is.

Conclusion

Roy has drawn on culturally particular ideas about metaphysics to critique culturally particular social practices. But, in order to make clear the human consequences of the social practices and to give his critique immediacy and emotional force, he has made use of techniques that themselves rely on cross-cultural capacities and inclinations. These include, first, universal principles of pattern perception; second, universal sensitivities to emotion cues (prominently mirroring responses to emotion expressions); and, finally, our universal, cognitively and emotionally guided capacities for engaging in the elaborative processing of intentional interpretation. This has allowed Roy to communicate his themes in a deeply moving way, not only through dialogue, but, perhaps even more compellingly, through visual style as well. The point is significant not only for this film but also for what it tells us about the interweaving of cultural particularity with cognitive and affective universality, and about the cognitive and affective principles that guide and justify interpretation—including the interpretation of style.

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Notes

[1] On the major non-European traditions, see Hogan and Pandit 2005.

[2] On emotion, expectation, and violation of expectation, see Hogan 2007.

[3] A graphic match comprises "Two successive shots joined so as to create a strong similarity of compositional elements (e.g., color, shape)" (Bordwell and Thompson 2001: 431).

[4] On the varieties of intent, see Hogan 2008.

[5] See Iacoboni 2008; see also Plantinga 1999 and Smith 1995: 96–102.

[6] Brahmins are members of the most spiritually prestigious, priestly caste in the Hindu system.

[7] Roy was a member of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) (Thoraval 2000: 71), a "left-wing" group "promot[ing] social issues and social realism in the arts" (Dwyer and Patel 2002: 57).

[8] These close-ups do, of course, focus the viewer's attention on narrative information. However, the emotional impact and the thematic significance of the shots are not confined to that information. Again, my point is not that narrative information is irrelevant or must be segregated from thematic and emotional operations of style. Rather, my point is that, because these are different functions, they may be separated or combined, and they have distinct, differently interpretable consequences.

[9] I am indebted to Lalita Pandit for help with the Hindi.

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