



## Understanding the Dynamics of Religious Intolerance through the Language of Cinema: 'An Analysis of the Film *Amu* by Shonali Bose'

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### Abstract

In the contemporary world cinema has emerged as a powerful medium cutting across all sections of society. Cinema acts as a crucible where the narrative and cinematic devices interact to tell human stories: stories of our concerns, fears, anxieties, hopes and aspirations. Being primarily an audio-visual medium, it is accessible to many and hence holds the imagination of people of all nationalities and identities. Like any other medium of creative expression, it has been playing an important role in representing socio-political, religious and cultural dynamics of different societies.

The multiethnic nature of the Indian subcontinent makes its social fabric rich but complex. Religion has been one of its important cultural constructs and adds to the complexity. It has witnessed events and scenarios where religion has played a defining role. There are a few works of cinema that have represented this facet of our existence. This paper aims at studying the award-winning film *Amu* by Shonali Bose for its exploration of the dynamics of religious intolerance against the Sikhs during the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The study reveals how the aesthetics of cinematic language and the narrative elements bring the much less-documented chapter of Indian history to the world stage. It explores the role played by this film in understanding the dynamics of religion in the ever-changing social fabric of India.

**Key words:** Cinema, powerful medium, creative expression, socio-political, cultural, religious dynamics, language.

### Introduction

The recent decades have seen the resurgence of communal violence as an expression of religious intolerance in the Indian society. By and large these episodes are accompanied with the involvement of the state structures as hinted in the aesthetic texts. Cinematographers have explored the potential of cinema as an art and as a language to portray the ghastly episodes of violence, thereby enabling the audience understand their physiology, making an everlasting appeal for peaceful coexistence. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots that forced the intelligentsia to revisit the partition of India have found expression in the film *Amu* by Shonali Bose.

*Aesthetic texts like literature and film enable us to interrogate the narratives of dominant cultural memory; they are the representations of everyday life that often mark the limits of historicist and social scientific accounts of historical experience.*

(Daiya 30)

The film addresses a global audience drawing their attention to the issues of religious intolerance mobilized and sponsored by the state against the Sikh minority that was already displaced during the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The cinematic text enables us to understand the present in relation to the past inaugurating serious academic discourse on the questions of nationhood and the rights of the minority communities in India.

Religious intolerance has been an endemic phenomenon to the Indian subcontinent since the *Mughal* invasions. The expressions of religious intolerance in the form of religious outbursts have been witnessed from time to time during the colonial era as well. However, the 1857 sepoy mutiny put into moment the institutionalization of the religious aspect of the Indian society by the British. The partition of the Indian subcontinent in the year 1947 witnessed large scale communal carnage leading to the birth of two independent nations: the Hindu dominated 'Hindustan' and the Muslim dominated 'Pakistan'.

The Sikh population was the worst sufferer during the partition. The North western province of Punjab was densely populated with the Sikh. Till the British regime they were occupying a special place and respect as soldiers in the army or as landowners in the Punjab province. However, with drawing of the Radcliff line they lost their lands and their respect as soldiers of the army. The 1980s saw the emergence of 'militancy instigated communal violence' for the first time in the history of independent India. The secular Congress government tried to crush the demands of the Sikh community.

The assassination of the then prime minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi by her Sikh body guards was the fulcrum that brought into motion the rampant killing of the helpless Sikh. The religious sentiments of the masses were exploited to camouflage the oppressive state regime. According to Mazumdar, the partition of India has been treated as an aberration in the nationalist march against colonialism and official nationalist history has rarely placed much emphasis on the study of this violent past (326). However, the 1984 anti-Sikh riots forced academicians and the intelligentsia to look back at partition of India from a different frame.

The 1984 riots were like partition again for the many Sikh refugees whose voice was again silenced by burying this horrifying chapter into the recesses of time. This state sponsored 'genocide' of the Sikhs was brought to the world audience by the 2002 film *Amu* by Shonali Bose who had worked as a social activist in the relief camps organized for the Sikh victims of the 1984 carnage. This work comes at a point when religious intolerance has seeped into the psyche of the Indian population to a disastrous level. An understanding of the cinema as a language of artistic expression would enable to understand and appreciate the portrayal of religious intolerance in the present cinematic text.

## Cinema as a Language of Artistic Expression

The concept of cinema as a language was brought forth in 1948 by Astruc, who talked of the cinema as the *camera-stylo*. Since its birth, cinema has attracted the attention of the poets, writers and critics of art. The poet Blaise Cendrars produced his 'alphabet' of cinema, while Ricciotto Canudo, in his 'Reflections on the Seventh Art', claimed that cinema was 'renewing writing', harking back to the language in images (Marcus 8-9).

Jean Mitry, the French film theorist, did pioneering work in understanding the nature of cinema as a language of artistic expression. In his book *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* as translated by Christopher King, Brains Lewis mentions that Mitry's cinema comprises of those movies which elevate us from the everyday, presenting a vivid, concrete world of experience, pregnant with symbolic meaning and deep feeling, a world which is "same" but "other" (Lewis v). The film *Amu* falls in this category of films.

Cinema is the new medium of expression that may be imbued with artistic sensibility to make it a work of art. Cinematic language, however, appears not as an abstract form to be supplemented by certain aesthetic qualities but as an aesthetic quality itself supplemented by the properties of language; in short, an organic whole in which art and language are fused, the one being indissolubly linked with the other (Mitry 2). The cinema is being seen as the concrete language of emotions, thoughts, and visual expression. Braudy and Cohen have identified the common denominators between cinema and literature:

*"Cinema was very quickly perceived to be an art and the theorists and filmmakers proudly asserted cinema's links to other arts because films embody, communicate, enforce and suggest meanings. Film theorists often suggest that film constitutes a language or a 'visual esperanto'."*

*(Braudy & Cohen as cited in Singh1)*

The language of the film is constituted by the image and the aural bytes. A means of expression capable of organizing, of constructing and communicating thoughts, able to develop ideas which can change, form, and transform themselves, then becomes a language- indeed *is* what is termed a language (Mitry 13). The meaning of the images depends on the context in which they are placed by the creator. Cinema deals in concrete images which demand a different type of reading and comprehension. According to Pfeleiderer and Lutze, most of what the film has to say "is to be 'read' as percepts, preverbal and concrete observations and simple identifications rather than words" (Singh 3).

The *mise en scene* and the editing techniques selectively rearrange the images to create the story from his/her perspective. According to Robert and Wallis "the study of a film's narrative is both the study of its story and also the study of how the story is told by *mise en scene* (i.e. what is to be filmed traditionally) cinematography, editing, sound and its structure" (Singh 3). According to Gibson, however, the frame's denotative and connotative meanings, in isolation, are incomplete; just as the full meaning of a word arises from its context, so the frame's meaning is incomplete without a context (8).

The comprehensive definition of language as "means of translating the tiny impulses of thought, all language is necessarily associated with the mental structures which organize them i.e., with the operations of the mind, which consists in conceiving, judging, reasoning, ordering, according to associations of analogy, consequence, or causation" given by Jean Mitry (16) revolutionized the way the language of cinema was being understood. Elaborating on the literary devices like symbolism, alliteration, imagery, he stresses that they are merely the impressions left by thought structures (17).

Cinema is also the medium with immense mass appeal. The sole *raison d'être* of cinema resides in the extent of its mass appeal (Mitry 4). Commenting on the artistic nature of cinema Anwar Huda states that it connects our subconscious, reflects our values, customs, styles and life (1). Avant-garde film maker Maya Deren has most effectively expressed the link of cinema to other art forms:

*The motion-picture medium has an extraordinary range of expression. It has in common with the plastic arts the fact that it is a visual composition projected on a two-dimensional surface; with dance, that it can deal in the arrangement of movement; with theatre, that it can create a dramatic intensity of events; with music, that it can compose in the rhythms and phrases of time and can be attended by song and instrument; with poetry, that it can juxtapose images; with literature generally, that it can encompass in its soundtrack the abstractions available only to language.*

*(as cited in Gibson 5)*

The insights of the critics like Emile Vuillermoz, Rene' Jeanne, Pierre Henry to name a few, played an important role in shaping the film theory. The artistic principles of cinema were established by the works of Sergei Eisenstein, Rudolf Arnheim and Bela Balzas. Further development of the film theories led to the emergence of the *auteur* theory in the 1950s and structuralism in the 1960s.

The chief proponent of structuralism Christian Metz believed that a film could be scientifically analyzed. The structuralism theory that could help determine and define the film maker's style gave way to the concept of '*Auteur Theory*'. According to Singh, if the film maker was to be seen as the author he would have to exhibit 'auteur' characteristics e.g. visual style with reference to *mise en scene* and cinematography, narrative structures and features and handling of situation and themes (3).

The 1990s saw the emergence of post- structuralism. Cinema was seen as a creative pursuit that produced films and a film could be seen as a text that could be read and comprehended through visual images and integrated in a particular context. Dr Indubala Singh highlights this aspect in the final analysis of film as an expression of the cultural construct, by quoting Hayward, "post structuralism opened up textual analysis to a pluralism of approaches, which did not reduce the text to the status of object of investigation but as much subject as those reading, writing or producing it" (4).

It is generally believed that making a film is a mechanical process. Understanding the operations of certain basic elements of film art reveal that the reality gets recreated during the process of film making and the 'visual reality' [the term used by Arnheim (9)] is not absolute. Arnheim was the first to try to establish general guidelines by relating the film effect to the psychology of perception (Mitry 2). Arnheim has refuted the charge that the camera mechanically records

life by proving that 'even in the simplest photographic reproduction of a perfectly simple object, a feeling for its nature is required which is quiet beyond any mechanical operation' (11). Images are then according to Anwar Huda, continuously expressing those truths, imaginations and ideas what languages labour to tell or write (7).

The 'filmic reality' is selected, recorded and projected by the camera through the vision of the *auteur*. The *auteur* of the film employs his aesthetic sensibility to highlight the hidden dimensions of objects, situation and characters in relation to life. The ordinary looking aspects of life, characters and objects may be enhanced by effectively handling the camera. The handling of the camera is more or less defining and determining the impact of the idea that is projected.

Space and time are the important formative elements of the film. The 'filmic reality' is produced by the coherent blending of the visual images by the filmmaker.

*The power of the film to represent organic processes could, however, also be identified with its unique 'mechanical intelligence', its 'mechanical thought', in Jean Epstein's formulations. For Epstein, the cinema produced 'thought' or 'thinking' (independently of a human observer), precisely because it was able to generate new and unprecedented forms and relations of time and space.*

(Marcus 4)

Space and time form a continuum in real life. However, in a film the space-time continuum is broken, and modified and integrated in accordance with the subject of the film. According to Arnheim, the subject of the film is an account of some action, and a certain logical unity of time and space must be observed into which the various scenes are fitted (21). The space time continuum of a scene may be interrupted by a flashback.

Novelist and critic Evelyn Riesman feels that some of the most exciting moments in any art come when, rather than exploiting its natural strengths, it instead stretches the boundaries of its natural limitations: "These leapings over boundaries are always exciting when poetry becomes painting in words, or when painting becomes a kind of calligraphy, when photography moves more and more towards something internal, something literary, turning it upon itself, so to speak, on the mind working behind it (Gibson 14-5). According to Alexandre Astruc's famous pronouncement of 1948, camera as a new form of writing has established itself.

*... I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of camera -stylo (camera -pen). This metaphor has a very precise sense. By it I mean that the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the image and the concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language.*

(Astruc as cited in Gibson 22)

### Portrayal of Religious Intolerance in *Amu*

Sonali Bose's film *Amu* is the honest socio-political documentation of the 1984-anti Sikh riots in Delhi. She came to encounter the ghost of communal violence during the rehabilitation of the Sikh victims in Delhi in November 1984.

The story begins as the quest of a young, Indian -American girl, Kajori Roy, who comes to India in search of her biological parents. The protagonist Kajori or 'Kaju' was adopted by Keya Roy, a social activist, when she was 3 year-old. She has told Kaju that her parents died in the Malaria epidemic that broke out in their village, Chandan Hola, in 1984. She has been living in Los Angeles since then. She has a zest for exploring life and recording it through her handy-cam. On one of her visits to Chandan Hola, she tries hard to recollect her past but all in vain. Her close up shot reveals her anguish and helplessness to recollect the past.

During one of the parties that she attends with her cousin Tuki, she meets Kabeer. He takes her to the slums of Triloknagar and the unexplored chapters of the lives of the innocent victims of November 1984 anti-Sikh riots are revealed. During her visit to Delhi University, she meets Gobind who has been running the famous Balbir's Dhaba. On her way back she comes across a boy running fast, trying to escape the men who were chasing him and shouting at him 'Don't let him escape.' She is overcome by a strange feeling of *déjà vu*. The second time she visits the slums she is overcome by the similar feeling of *déjà vu*. Gobind reveals to Kaju the macabre truth of the 1984 riots in Delhi. He tells Kaju how the Sikhs were dragged out of their homes and burnt to death. The innocent Sikh children were also not spared. The traumatic memories are somewhere registered in her subconscious and drift her to the places that are hitherto unknown to her.

During the party at the Sehgal's she comes to know about the 'Operation Bluestar' and the 'Black Hole'. When she queries Arun Sehgal about his responsibilities during the riots, he in ill-disguised temper changes the topic of conversation by asking her if at all she was born in Chandan Hola. In an attempt to find some information, Kaju breaks open the lock of Keya's old trunk that and to her utter surprise finds a death certificate which she believed to be of her real mother's. She rushes to Trilokenagar and as she goes to the slum colony observing the place with great care she feels overcome with terrifying thoughts.

When Kabeer comes to know about the ghastly murder of the innocent Sikhs, he tries to find some written literature on the episode. There is no documentation of the riots. The interactions of Kajori with the widows of the riots reveal the horrid truth of the burning of children and men to death by the local *goondas*.

*Kaju finally learns the truth from her mom (Brinda Karat) that her real name is Amu Singh and she was born into a Sikh family. She discovers that her father and brother were brutally killed during the Delhi riots of 1984, which led to the eventual suicide of her mother. In a searing climax the young people are forced to confront the reality of the past and how it affects the present.*

(Sheena Singh)

The film maker presents the social activists like who comforted and rehabilitated the victims, bureaucrats who let the wave of communal violence spread unhindered. Some politicians are hinted through descriptions of Shanno, a victim. The story ends with the news of the outbreak of the communal violence in Gujarat following the *Godhra* carnage. The film exhibits the blending of the different cinematic devices like **symbolism, motifs, close ups, flashback and realism** to portray the communal violence.

### The two main symbols in the novel and film are the train and the red kite.

**Train** in case of such episodes evokes the images of violence bringing back to life the haunting memories of partition. Violence on trains brings till date stands testimony to the 'genocide' that came in the wake of partition. In one of flashback scenes Durga Mausi reveals how the trains were being searched for the Sikhs during the riots. The scene picturing the Sikh men and children being pulled out of the trains and being burnt alive reveals the intensity and the dreadfulness of rioting.

The **train** appears at the end symbolizing movement of time and life that is intercepted by communal violence. Barely had Kaju and Kabeer reconciled with the fact that the 1984 riots were a matter of past and stepped ahead, the news of the communal carnage in Gujarat is flashed across the TV screen. The burning down of the cargo of the 'Sabarmati Express' carrying the 59 Hindu activists at Godhara sets Gujarat into flames. The **red kite** towards the end of the novel as well as the film is symbolic of the triumph of the spirit of survival. Just as the kite advances against all odds, Kaju has reconciled with the horrifying past and moves ahead with the pace of time. Kaju here becomes the representative of the victims of communal violence.

The **brick building** in Triloknagar is a recurring symbol that gains significance as the story proceeds gaining significance as a **motif** in the story. During her quest to search her identity Kaju comes to the slums of Triloknagar and she comes across a brick building. The camera in a sudden close up captures her unease when she comes for the first time at the building. She starts having incoherent thoughts that leave her restless. The medium shot showing her sleeplessness become more convincing with use of natural lighting.

The slum of Triloknagar was completely burnt down during the riots. Towards the climax Keya relates to Kaju in a flashback the fact that it was the place where she was living happily with her darji, mother and her younger brother Ajju when the riots broke out. The traumatizing story of the murder of Ajju and darji is revealed by Keya. This place was also the mute witness to agony of Shanno, Kaju's mother, who hanged herself to death. This building witnesses the stories of dismay and anguish as narrated by the eyewitnesses Gobind, Chachaji, Durga Mausi, Gobind. Initially it symbolizes the association between Kaju's feeling of déjà vu and her uneasy, sleepless nights. As the story progresses it assumes significance by being the mute witness to the killing of innocent Sikhs.

**Flash back** is used to relate the story in the film integrating the events at different junctures of time to form an organic whole.

The medium shot showing the interaction of Kaju and Kabeer with Durga Mausi goes for a flashback revealing how the Sikhs were massacred. Trains were rampantly searched for the Sikhs. The Sikhs were brutally dragged and garlanded with tyres and lit on fire.

Her interactions with Shanti Kumari reveal that the 20 years had passed and still no justice was granted to the victims. The sound track effectively reflects the uncanny feeling that signifies that the present bears the stamps of the past horror and pain.

In one of the most touching scenes Keya reveals the happy family of Kaju who lived with her darji, mother and her younger brother Ajju. the film employs flashback to achieve artistic and logical unity of the film. Keya relates to her daughter Kaju, the gruesome fate that her father, brother and mother had met during the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The intercepting of the space- time continuum evolves as a powerful cinematic device that develops artistic integrity in the film. According to Arnheim, in a good film each scene must be so well planned in the scenario that everything necessary, and only what is necessary, takes place within the shortest space of time (23).

The noise in the background is terrifying. It instills the chaos and disorder. She hides Amu and Arjun in the small brick house. Darji is dragged by the crowd that was shouting anti-Sikh slogans. *Amu* makes you feel the meaning of violence and death by remaining on a **close up** of a child's face watching her father being burnt alive rather than showing that act (Bose, on the making of *Amu*). Another close up shot, towards the climax from the film *Amu*, intensely portrays the immense love of Keya for little *Amu*. It was the power of the filmic close-up (the defining device of the film, unavailable to the stage) that it could enlarge 'this emotional action of the face to the sharpest relief' or show us 'a play of the hands in which anger and rage or tender love or jealousy speak in unmistakable language' (Marcus 7).

The police doesn't help Amu's mom. She runs over the railway bridge. She approaches the politicians for help. On reaching close to them she finds that he is the one who is giving orders to murder each and every single Sikh. According to Gohil, it is difficult seeing this film as a non-Sikh - not getting the chill up the spine as Kaju watches her father beaten and burned by a crowd; not wanting to scream as a group of Hindus cut a Sikh's hair to hide him; not cringing at the bitter words of 1984 widows who have yet to receive any justice for what happened to their husbands and sons during those three days.

### Realism is used throughout the film to portray the communal violence.

The slums have been realistically portrayed when Kaju is returning home from Gobind's home. A sudden feeling of déjà vu overcomes her when she reaches a particular brick building. The expression of Kaju in the **close up** is incomprehensible. Probably the subconscious memories of the trauma that she had experienced were revived. Mentioning the impact of violence heard or witnessed as child, Ellora Puri makes a point, "Somehow these stories which I just heard are much more visually etched in my mind, than the graphic videos that I have watched of the 1992 killings or the post- Godhra pogrom probably because as children our imaginations give us the scope to register things more starkly and intensely." The close up shot expresses this undertone.

Chachaji mentioned the year 1984. There were nearly 5,000 Sikhs killed in Delhi. The sound track alongwith his expressions intensifies the strange feeling of the uncanny hinting at the primeval violence.

The intensity of the violence is brought to the fore by a number of scenes. The medium shot where interactions are going on in a party at the Sehgal's, Kaju mentions that the number of Sikhs murdered in Delhi in 1984 were far more in number than the people in 9/11 yet no one knows anything outside about it.

The photographs of the brutal carnage of 1984 are discovered when Kabeer is surfing the net for information about the 1984 riots. The facial expressions of Kabeer reveal his angst and his spirit to stand for the truth.

The medium shot showing the interaction with Chachaji who witnessed the anti-Sikh riots closely also exposes the role of local *goondas* like KK who dragged out Balbir Singh ji. While the actual rioters had reportedly been summoned from the urban villages located on the outskirts of the city, the most macabre violence was perpetrated in low caste resettlement colonies by the locality residents (Kaur 34). The scene that picturises the crowd pouring kerosene on Balbir Chacha's body and Kishan Kumar litting his body truthfully revives the manner in which the helpless, innocent Sikh were murdered. Kabeer's interactions with Kishan Kumar reveal that the voter lists were handed over to local *goondas* for selectively murdering the Sikh residents. Politicians supplied kerosene to burn the Sikhs.

The film documents and projects the communal violence against the Sikhs in Delhi in 1984. This episode had not been covered by the media as the only channel during 1984 was the state sponsored Doordarshan. In an eye opening scene Keya declares that the riots were engineered by the state authorities. She consoles Kaju when she regrets her inability to save her family. The close up of Keya in this flashback scene reveals the anguish of Keya.

Through Amu's story we come to understand what the distress of surviving the aftermath of violence could mean for the countless Sikhs. The story ends on 28<sup>th</sup> Feb 2002 when the gruesome Sabarmati Train Express attack sparked off communal violence in Gujarat. The nation is again plunged into the flames of state sponsored communal carnage.

*They didn't hear the radio in the dhaba, crackling with the breaking news of karsevaks burned to death aboard a train in Gujarat, in a small town called Godhra. As people gathered around the radio, the news report continued with its dispassionate words. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad had vowed retaliation.*

(Bose 136)

## Conclusion

According to Kumar, literary and cultural productions can make a significant contribution to contemporary intellectual and political efforts to envision the peaceful coexistence of diverse religious groups in the Indian sub-continent (Kumar xv). This dauntless effort by Bose expresses the concern of the diaspora over matters of national concern. According to Prabhjot Parmar, There may not be after all, a stringent demarcation between the interest of Indians in India and elsewhere on subjects such as Partition and communal violence that continue to be relevant outside the limits of the homeland. Moreover, such compartmentalization seldom ties down creative writers, filmmakers and artists (193). In her interview to Sheena K. Singh, Bose relates her purpose behind *Amu*.

*I want people to know that this was absolutely orchestrated by the government and an act of state terrorism- not just mob rioting as typically heard in the media. This was a planned cold-blooded massacre. The army was told to stand out for three days and not intervene as politicians gave kerosene to gundas to carry out specific orders of wiping out Sikhs. There has never been so much hard evidence, and yet it's been covered up for over 25 years without any trials. And the families of the victims are still waiting for justice. I want people to know the truth...*

(Bose)

The film *Amu* by Shonali Bose is not only an indispensable socio-political documentation of the 1984 "genocide" of the Sikhs during the reign of the secular congress government but also an effort that tends to fill up the lacunae in the contemporary history of India, when it takes into account the facts as well as the affective dimensions of human loss and suffering. According to Taylor, historians cannot discover the past, instead they can invent a story or stories about it, based on the 'facts' as they understand them, but imposing their own order and meaning upon those 'facts' by the structure of their argument and their choice of language (13).

According to Kumar, much of present-day historiography has become alive to the dangers of writing a monolithic and "objective" history; this development has resulted in the inclusion of nontraditional materials like memoirs, testimonies of survivors, and literary narratives as valid sources for writing a new "history from below" (126). The literary and the cinematic texts that deal with the problem of communal violence are important from the point of relearning the history and also ensuring that the present generations are shrouded from the persistence of the horrors of communal violence.

The film reflects the concern of the Indian diaspora over the question of minority identity in India in the atmosphere of rising communal violence. According to Priya Kumar, if state authorities are guilty of effacing or ignoring stories of individual pain and suffering, secular academic discourse also, in large part, has been unable to address the effects of communal violence in its disciplinary narratives, perhaps because violence in its very viscosity demands a different kind of telling (123). This film has drawn the attention of the global audience to the pain of the minority community through her creative pursuit. Sethi has expressed the gratitude of the Sikhs by referring to the work *Amu* as a lighthouse (36).

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