

Silent Killers: Human Physiognomy and Body Language as Receptacles of Fear in Shyam Benegal's Nishant (1975)

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Abstract

In this paper, I intend to explore the prevalent, pervasive element of fear that motion picture images effectively capture in all its variations. In our present world more than ever, we find ourselves besieged by it quite literally and it clearly colours our socio-political-cultural experiences in multiple ways. This paper is based on ramifications of a feudal hierarchy and gendered discrimination as also bodily harm as depicted in Shyam Benegal's NISHANT. Through the medium of its screenplay drenched in uncompromising realism, I look at the very core of fear distributed to various persons through the human physiognomy and body language, including the role of eyes, voice and hands, thereby imparting it a visual value and integrating it through identification on the readers part as the social perspectives of the issues get a more intimate and nuanced base in this paper.

Key Words: fear, physiognomy, body language, eyes, hands, voice.

INTRODUCTION

Physiognomy (from the Greek Physis meaning nature and Gnomon meaning judge or interpreter) is the assessment of a person's character or personality from her/his outer appearance, especially the face without reference to its implied characteristics. We all know our sensory attributes are heightened from early stages of life through pictorial transference in terms of illustrations, paintings and of course visual encapsulation through moving images in movies and small screens. This identification with colour schemes, humours, and emotions is actually never dictated by an exclusive state of being as it reflects our own experiences that we draw from when collating memories with the image(s) portrayed.

It's because images can often function as effective mediums at times when words skimp the surface so that subterranean issues are silently but potently realized. For me, Edward Munch's THE SCREAM exemplifies my own personal sense of chaos and cacophony better than a whole litany of words. Hence I feel strongly about our physiognomies and body languages

being windows to our souls quite like the sensual authority of eyes. Moods and states of mind feed our receptacles in varying ways. Human behaviour is thus unveiled. It's about identifying with how we will react in much the similar manner as the reactions captured through those images. A gradient of fear then is among the most prominent in all of us.

In this paper, I have chosen visual signifiers as manifested in eyes, hands, voice, face and overall bearing of personalities among people as depicted in the seminal realistic work of cinema that is NISHANT (1975)

Class, gender are put on a collision course as orthodox beliefs are unleashed on unsuspecting victims and the specific becomes the universal and vice versa. As Renuka Parmecha says, "the female body becomes the site of contestation between power and powerlessness, between imposition and freedom, between the system and the individual. The moment there is a protest, all social institutions- all ideas of respectability and loyalty conspire to silence the female voice (Parmecha 1)"

So through the exploration of these physical features of the human body, I look at how fear manages to control all elements and produce microaggressions we all identify with readily from day to day life .

EYES

When we watch a cinematic recreation of events we have heard and seen around us, or in the time honoured tradition, let our vision get arrested by words printed on paper, our eyes take on the primacy of a recording equipment. In real life, many occurrences fall between lines of moral allowance and often bitter truths are left unsaid. This is when literature and cinema become likely, accessible allies to our larger understanding. In NISHANT (NIGHT'S END, 1975), eyes are like mirrors on the wall. Absorbing every generational/ social inequity with passive aggression, all characters are privy to their surroundings, set as the film is in pre-Independence India. Andre Malraux has written, "behind the artist stands the cathedral, the library and the museum. Behind each form is a conquest- a taking over, an incorporation, a further development - of another previously existing form, whose traces it bears (Malraux 2)" In this film, all performers let those traces get captured through their expressive faculties.

The first instance in which we view the horrors of institutionalized fear in the nondescript Andhra village here is through the eyes of the temple priest (Satyadev Dubey) when a broken stone surface in the premises reveals jewels meant to adorn deities missing. The bowels of sanctity have been distorted and blasphemy rules supreme in a set-up where religion is the sole normative cover that protects the people from larger evils. The close up of the priest with his eyes opened and held in bewildering horror is a strong build up to the unraveling pandemonium. Silent resignation is etched in his eyes, dropping with the realization that he has to stay mum even after instinctively knowing the perpetrators' identity. This is quite like the opening of director Shyam Benegal's preceding classic ANKUR (1974) in which a

procession of women come from a temple in a verdant portion of Andhra Pradesh and their silhouettes are traced. This so called foregrounding of purity shown through the body language of rural folk is actually a smokescreen for further tilling of social realities in which feudal hierarchy and sexual dissipation are explored.

The narrative then records the devilish glee in the eyes of louts Prasad (Mohan Agashe) and Anjaiya (Anant Nag) who have amassed the jewels for themselves. Their reign goes unchecked as they are not only ruffians with roving eyes and inextinguishable lust but belongs to a bloodline of exploitation by dint of being brothers of the prevailing landlord/zamindar. On his part, the eldest landlord (iconic Amrish Puri) operates as being the harbinger of power as in any backwater in any part of the globe. Puri's innate ability to convey corruption and generate fear through his earnestly severe eyes without actually committing any act himself only compounds the level of terror in terms of physiognomy in our reception as well as on the villagers within the narrative fold. "The power of suggestion.. is inherent in all art and is a prerogative of all artists(Ray 3) His brothers are shown then negotiating with a poor man with nonchalant shamelessness to send his wife over to the haveli at night. Their lecherous eyes say it all. Years of upholding status quo has made them lionized in their zealous pursuit of women across the village. The silent drop of the face of the man and his visibly distraught wife records her inevitable submission in their eyes. She is the hunted prey. These are eyes that have to barter shame for survival. We, as viewers, form the second party whose eyes see it all with disgust and an uneasy stomach churn. We respond because we know misogyny is very much alive and so is sexual exploitation of women. Drooping shoulders and colourless, stricken visages attest hence to generations of poverty. There is fear of inviting unruly tempers and opposition and so resistance is let go by them.

On the other end of this spectrum is the youngest brother Vishwam(Naseeruddin Shah) whose downward eyes showcase timidity, repression and perhaps filtered through his folks' toxic machismo, he had become sober. Also his lack of indulgence in the immoral activities of his home perhaps informs his differing look and persona. The fear of becoming a monster has probably made him content in his aloof nature and he hardly makes eye contact with anyone. His eyes show that any non committal male within such an environment as his is almost as much of an outsider as the womenfolk. Then there are the eyes of his wife Rukmini(Smita Patil) Wide eyed, a new bride, her look has the reproach for male dominated decrees of her marital home yet concern for her husband and the fear of him turning into one of his own kind. There's exhortation to Vishwam to not pick up bad ways under pressure or impulse and simultaneously the solid detachment and counsel to not be identified as an ancillary presence in a home with no female guide. It's a tricky interplay that the famed screen legend Patil accomplishes with the artistry of someone whose eyes are her very beacons. A quote validates that point as following - "Our female artists have always shown a greater talent and sense of deeper suffering where tragic emotions are involved. In that, more

often than not, they have been helped by more meaty roles with greater histrionic demands (Bently 4)"

The other pivotal figure in the tale is Sushila (Shabana Azmi), wife of the newly appointed schoolmaster (Girish Karnad) Her domestic bliss is eventually shattered and her worldview will change. Her eyes see the seamier side of life. But in the initial part, her eyes have the desire to have a bigger mirror for herself, an innocent wish in a decadent world, also a fear of being have not in a world of material comforts. It's a little touch that says a lot about class consciousness in a socially sensitive script. The principle role of eyes takes a 360 degree turn in NISHANT as Vishwam falls prey to his obsession for Sushila; without saying anything, he lays his eyes on her while his brothers converse with the schoolmaster. The master looks back and forth and gesticulates to Sushila to go inside which she innocently brushes off. Vishwam, hence, true to his ilk, expresses a latent desire to possess this woman irrespective of their marital status and Shah expertly conveys the dawning sense of his emotions through fixed looks. These are eyes not dripping with lust and indifference, it's the first opening for attraction for his wimpish, repressed self but the ball is set in the court and his brothers' store of lust finds a new prey as they promise to acquire her for his sake. So Vishwam becomes a joint perpetrator and aggressor too. Again their physiognomy prevails in terms of their machinations and impunity and on a fateful night, Sushila is abducted by the two louts. Eyes now fully realize the impact of fear manifested in mechanics of siege on the body of an individual. Sexual politics and perpetration of rape emanate from fear of authority of the perpetrators and the reaction of the public to this forceful abduction is of silence and blank stares. The headmaster emits disbelief at their composure and is rattled at this sudden change. But we know such acts are the norm in this village and his crestfallen look is of having come amidst this zombified consciousness. His bespectacled look mixes pain with realization. Fear is in the present and in what is to come as he is in the orbit of the oppressors. Stoicism prevails hence among the people. The element of tragedy here is invoked through some lines, "at the heart of tragedy is a tough dialectical struggle in which the victory of either side is credible. That the doom of the hero is inevitable is an irony, for this way hero who has no chance of winning is in the end the spiritual winner (Bently 5)" ; the headmaster/ husband of the abducted Sushila exemplifies that through the course of the film and via his silent looks.

A general look of apathy is encountered by him as policeforce, media and local village authorities express their helplessness in coming to his aid. Again, the interminable cycle of commitment to the zamindar's iron hand is in their visages. There are different perspectives in their expressions. The newspaper editor shows a pedantic disinterest and rationale and in a smattering of English, conveys the indifference of educated minority to such happenings while the policeman, in a mocking tone, jests him to initiate a turn of the screw before even thinking of challenging the terrorizing zamindar's might. His indifference is in your face. All

gazes are then on the supposed naiveté of the schoolmaster and he is merely a stoic ghost. Somewhere intrinsic fear has made them hardened and accepting of glaring ills.

Then a sequence puts the survivor at the center of her realization as Sushila wakes up in a spare room to internalize her transformed identity and a muted storm of fear and terror about her position is felt with grave impact by Shabana Azmi's looks alone. She is clothed and does not bear any direct marks of violation but her eyes record the nightmare that is visited upon her as a sexual agent in a male dominated domain. She is a 'kept woman' akin to cattle and disgust, pain and inescapable trauma is there without any eye rolling trapping of melodrama. This use of physiognomy makes the sense of dread more impactful. This is especially made significant as the room in which she is kept is littered with few wooden items, thus implying that she has indeed been objectified. Soon, the looks take on a poignant note as both Rukmini and Sushila come face to face. The look of understanding another woman's plight is there on Rukmini's part. As Rukmini offers Sushila fresh change of clothes and asks for her to eat and have a bath, the latter develops a faint smile on her face, in an acknowledgement of their mutual commiseration as women with limited choices over their fates or bodies. Also there could be a latent truth, almost a corollary to fear that their roles could have been reversed in another hypothetical situation. In another touching scene, Rukmini again exhorts Sushila to eat food and not give up hope of returning to her husband and live on for her young son while the maid, with a sly, bitter expression on, hits her hard with the point that now that her honour has been sullied, her husband will never accept her, in a direct approximation of male double standards. A confounded look on each face attests to this shared destiny and gives heft to the proceedings. "Victimhood becomes part of a survival struggle or embodies the concept of an ideal womanhood. Very often, the rebellion itself upholds traditional values or heroism displayed falls within the Durga/ Kali image (Jain 6)"; this is where stereotypes are broken in Nishant.

Rukmini comes to occupy a difficult, precarious position over the course of this tale. She watches with resignation as Vishwam does the deed with Sushila and clambers on the bed they share and she is distanced from him with her body against the wall. Her husband has finally equated his subverted male ego and has become a monster of his own volition. He is a complex man. He may be clearly caught in an arranged marriage but does love and affection inform his treatment of Sushila? In a scene he prepares to mark his union with her but after watching her disheveled, shaken and bawling on the floor after being assaulted by his brothers, his shame shows on his stricken looks as well as sympathy for the woman. He is not a predator at first glance but is inevitably a participant and perpetrator even if he does but resort to cruelty on Sushila. As viewers, specifically males, the fear of becoming and, in turn, upholding such male specific traits or seeing it in the males we know, on our parts, is provided here. The most striking part is when Sushila reconciles with her fate and boldly asks for her own share of the temple and kitchen, a humble request, now that escape is nowhere.

She has been propelled to turn tables and be emboldened in the absence of rehabilitation, given her extraordinary circumstances. Survival is the key word here. She smiles again as she looks at her reflection in the big mirror, something she had wished but could not afford earlier. The mirror is symbol of the reality staring back at her, marking a change in her facial humour and also reflected in her image on the glass surface. She has a bold look of practical wisdom on her face even as Rukmini has no corner to cut for herself. Her plangent eyes are vessels of acceptance and experience as time has taught her that nothing can really change. As she stands at the doorway, a strain of anger is captured through her eyes and facial expressions. A powerful quote by G. B. Shaw comes to mind here, "it is immorality not morality that needs protection, it is morality not immorality that needs restraint; for morality with all the dead weight of human inertia and superstition to hang on the pioneer, and all the malice of vulgarity and prejudice to threaten him, is responsible for many persecutions and many martyrdoms (Shaw 7)"

Vishwam, at this point, wishes to honour this demand of Sushila and boldly asks his wife to understand the moral compromises borne by the other woman. His physiognomy has genuine concern for the bereaved party and he knows that he is directly responsible for this distorted state of affairs. Like every other male within his fold, he has become 'man enough' to exert his influence on the cornered womenfolk ; by using his voice in a high octave with his wife, he shows us he is no different from the other males no matter how hard he may try to make amends. A corruptible world can only produce such progenies in a misogynistic culture. Vishwam is a product of that and ultimately a facilitator himself.

The pivotal part arrives when Sushila hails all her pent up anger and frustrations at her husband in a chance meeting with him at the temple as she has gained limited liberty to venture out of the house. She lets her eyes do her bidding while her distraught husband with no support by his side is injured at a deeper level. She uses biting words to contextualize her predicament as she has lost her passivity after being subjected to her degraded status and spares not even her well meaning better half. He is morally castrated first by society and then by her and this stokes him to make a final breakthrough. Ultimately, the insurrection that is whipped up by him and the priest reaches the home of the dictum dictators and violence ensues, where faces, voices and eyes all give in to the internalized cacophony of the oppressed, breaking the cycle of perpetual fear; Sushila, Vishwam and the schoolmaster come at the center of the storm but there are no resolutions as they are as hapless as before. In the end, their collective and individual physiognomies are characterized by exhaustion in throes of such distress. Their faces are blank slates while an injured schoolmaster still searches for his wife. For how much can one endure to be reduced to nothing and live amidst endless nights of oppression, sometimes inflicted by one's own instincts and mostly by an obstinate, depraved social order? By not offering any actual closure and ending on a note of exasperation, NISHANT reaches the point of expressive void where fear is for the axis of evil

to continue its circuitous run because one can never return to the initial point of stability. Looking at the real world where rape, gender insensitivity and nepotism gnaws at us in the modern era, that fear is persistent and urgent. We hence wholly identify with the looks, voices and gestures of intensity portrayed in NISHANT as they are directly reflective of our own and even vicariously we identify with these universal issues. We look at them and feel them deeply.

HANDS AND VOICES

Hands too occupy an important place within the screenplay to signify major actions and expressions. The embrace occasioned by hands occurs between both couples central to the script. As the schoolmaster looks on lovingly at his wife and she sings a lullaby, their mutual compatibility is brought to the fore and then both embrace. In another instance as Vishwam leaves the living space where his brothers' double entendres rule the roost, he comes back and embraces his wife as he reclaims a tender place for himself where legitimate affection is miles away from the one dimensional agency of lust. This embrace can also signify healthy physical consummation, free from the fear of impending sexual bathos later on where force overrides consensus.

A second and more severe instance is the one shot where Sushila is held by her legs and hands by the two brothers and she vocalises her tumult with winces and sighs akin to a sacrificial lamb while the monstrous visages of the brothers loom in close up. Close up also reveals the face of the victim. She vocalises her trauma with these wordless, monosyllabic expressions. It's a powerful use of the voice in a scenario where aural suspension is more effective than verbosity of any kind. The depths of the afflicted spirit are hence probed. There is "a lack of distance in such works between the body on the screen and the spectator's body in the audience- as simple emotions course through both- a cultural form of at least problem formulating of deep-rooted questions of sexual identity(Modleski 8)" ; these hands cut forth her dignity and resistance as they assail her sense of individuality. The hands bind her spirit.

The most touching use of hands is when the schoolmaster/Sushila's husband reprises daily chores she used to perform which include making breakfast, bathing his son and cleaning the lavatory in the exact symmetry as his absent wife. It is a gender volte-face where his emotional state is highlighted and the use of hands posit the normal manner in which he has to conduct himself for the sake of his son though unease is in his movements and facial expression. A fear of losing established bonds is manifested here.

The other powerful use of hands is when the rural populace of the village takes up arms and attacks the zamindar's family in an act of retribution. Here, hands take the form and agency of action. In a more metaphorical mould, the shift of power is from the hands of the powerful to the voiceless. In an agrarian economy, the hands that tilled the soil and performed farming changed their intrinsic natural bearing to use them for another bigger source of validation.

Fear has been left behind in this manner. The use of such significant physical tools were all the more relevant for me owing to the profound manner in which the screenplay had materialized, courtesy the writers, giving me the freedom to analyse the structure and internal skeleton of its social consciousness.

CONCLUSION

So, the use of physiognomy as regards face, eyes and hands fulfill the social capacities of NISHANT (1975). It has helped me to explore the reactive identity of the people involved in the screenplay and attempt to draw from the realistic nature of their expressions at crucial junctures, making the expressive faculties mirror our very own especially regards the most pertinent element of fear.

Fear is never too explicit as it burrows deep into the soul and mind, psychologically affecting us and so I think the idea of the thematic material presented here is able to look at the central values of the topic with clarity and understanding. Most importantly, it prioritizes and puts premium on the core of images whether visual or written to convey our deepest feelings and emotions while cinema is an ally that delves into them in a manner other media often may not.

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