

# Maternal Melodrama in the Realist Framework : A Study on 'Tales from the Margins by Kavita Joshi'.

Ajay Mathew Jose

Cinematic realism and melodrama usually find themselves in opposite poles in filmic discourse. A film genre like the documentary which finds itself positioned more toward the realist pole is often used as vehicle for an authentic representation of reality. As a rule, melodramatic elements are thought to contaminate the 'purity' of realist cinema. (Singer,2001). But putting a cinematic work exclusively into these watertight containers would not do justice to the representative aspect of any cinema. Thus, it becomes important to study the mixing of these elements particularly in a rigid realist framework like that of the documentary and the resulting effect it has on the audience.

Many feminist film critics in the 1960s and 70s have argued that documentaries which comply with the realist conventions do not present an accurate portrayal of women as they simply follow the customs of 'art for life's sake' thereby imitating life as seen through a transparent glass. Claire Johnston calls such cinema as dangerous for feminists since it used a realist aesthetic which is embedded in capitalist representations, thereby hindering the portrayal of the 'truth' of woman's oppression. For Johnston, this shortcoming could only be overcome through the counter-cinema movement. This paper intends to look upon the effectiveness of realist film as not only a device of political idealism but also as a canvas to represent intricate emotions that side with the melodramatic pole within a realist framework by keeping Kavita Joshi's *Tales from the Margins*(2006) as a reference point.

*Tales from the Margins*(2006), a 23 minute documentary directed by Kavita Joshi gives a picture of the Indian state of Manipur where the notorious Armed Forces Special Powers Act,1958 (AFSPA) is in place. The film essentially falls under the genre of realist documentary. The affinity towards the realist pole in representation of such films makes it devoid of any of the conventional apparatuses that helps define and analyze them using the same yardsticks of the classical narrative cinema.

When we analyze documentaries (cinema verite or otherwise), it is important to look upon the objectivity of this form of cinema. Documentaries often presents to the spectator, clear political opinions articulated with great skill and sophistication, built around the idea of convincing any audience to adopt a clear stance. Thus the argument that such films follow realist conventions by imitating and presenting life in its truest form is to a certain extent diminished. *Tales from the Margins*, for example is overtly political in nature. The opening scene of the film shows twelve Manipuri women publicly disrobing in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters holding banners saying, 'Indian Army, Rape us' thus makes it clear to the spectator, the political ideology that resonates throughout the film. This does not mean that the representations in the film portrays a sense of falsity, rather it represents a tweaked reality.

### **Suffering and Resistance**

The basic plot of the documentary centres around a handful of incidents that happened in Manipur– the custodial disappearance of Sanamacha, the hunger fast by Irom Sharmila, her mother's iron resolve, the custodial killing of Manorama, and the enraged protests by the twelve Meira Paibis<sup>1</sup> who disrobed at the Assam Rifles headquarters. The documentary resonates between discourses on victimhood and resistance from a women's point of view. The underlying message represented through these events is that it is the women who are most affected in times of conflict. The fact that the represented discourses within the film are that of women, and that the film was directed by a women makes it eligible to be analyzed within the purview of feminist theory.

The killing of Sanamacha, a 15 year old boy by the Indian army officials brings to the spectator, the image of a suffering womanhood. The image of Irom Sharmila and her fast that began six years ago in protest of AFSPA is shown in contrast. The filmmaker uses these contrasting images to bring in that element of pathos. It may be argued that pathos is the chief emotion that the director expects in the spectator in both representations; that of the sufferer and that of the resistor.

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<sup>1</sup> Meira Paibis: Torch bearing women. These women activists patrol their villages at night, to prevent the proverbial 'midnight knock' and to delay the arrests till morning if possible. They get their names from the burning torches (meiras) that they carry for light.

Ben Singer, in his *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* argues that melodrama consistently displays "key constitutive factors": pathos, overwrought or heightened emotion, moral polarization (good vs. evil), non-classical narrative structure, and sensationalism (emphasis on action, violence, and thrills). Singer takes his reference from films like *Stella Dallas*(1937) to arrive at this observation.

Looking at *Tales from the Margins* within this framework enables us to understand the melodramatic elements embedded in the realist genre. For a politically fueled documentary as *Tales from the Margins*, merely following realist conventions especially when dealing with feminine discourses might seem insufficient. The melodramatic 'constitutive factors' listed by Singer thus are incorporated into the documentary to fill this insufficiency.

### **Maternal Melodrama in the realist framework**

Linda Williams in her essay, *Something Else Besides a Mother* divides filmic narrative into two- male and female forms. The female form, which is of interest to us, Williams says, have "less linear narratives encouraging identification with passive, suffering heroines." Extending this idea to include the concept of representation of motherhood which is a subset of the female narrative form, Williams throws light on the sub-genre of maternal melodrama, in which the stress on representation is the image of the sacrificing mother who makes the sacrifice for her own or for the benefit of her children.

The representation of motherhood in *Tales from the Margins* comes in the form of the mother of Sanamacha, a student of 15, taken away in the dead of the night, mistaken for an insurgent of the same name and through Sakhi Devi, Irom Sharmila's mother. The represented motherhood confirms with Williams concept of self-sacrificing mother. But in a realist documentary, this representation acquires a new dimension. For example, Sakhi Devi, the mother of Irom Sharmila had not spoken to, nor met her daughter for years, for fear that the mother's tears might shake the daughter's resolve.

The narrative structure of the film thus can be seen from the maternal point of view. Apart from the image of the suffering mother, the film also offers the image of the resistor, through the opening scene in which the twelve Meira Paibis, all middle-aged women protesting against the atrocities committed by the army particularly against women by stripping and shouting "Indian Army rape us! We are all Manorama's mothers." The use of the naked

body; a 'desexualized' maternal body as a canvas of protest brings in a new dimension to the entire discourse on motherhood. The idea of motherhood as not merely a domestic phenomena is subverted . When the Meira Paibis women declare themselves as mothers of Manorama, the idea of a universal motherhood sympathizing and empathizing with the plight of Manorama as well as women who were subjected to rape and other forms of torture comes into fore.

The importance of the film in terms of motherhood is the overt political baggage that it carries. Deleuze and Guattari in their essay, 'What is a Minor Literature?: from *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* ' characterizes minor literature as literature that has been deterritorialized and having a thorough political framework. *Tales from the Margins* in that respect is a text of minor literature in the sense that the narrative of the film comes from the marginalized sections. Incidents such as those depicted in the film that concern the north-east states are often not reported in the mainstream Indian media. Narratives such as this not only depict the marginalized, but also showcases the political dissent particularly towards a 'sacrosanct' state agency like the Indian army.

### Conclusion

*Tales from the Margins* by Kavita Joshi thus works within the realist framework but doesn't fail to induce the necessary pathos by incorporating melodramatic elements into it. The effectiveness of this realist discourse has in no way diminished the overall effect it has on the spectator. By being a text that falls into the category of minority literature, the bourgeois narrative style of the documentary which cannot encompass the 'true' emotions of women and their sufferings as proposed by Claire Johnston is to a great extent nullified in this film.

### Works Cited

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