

Interventions

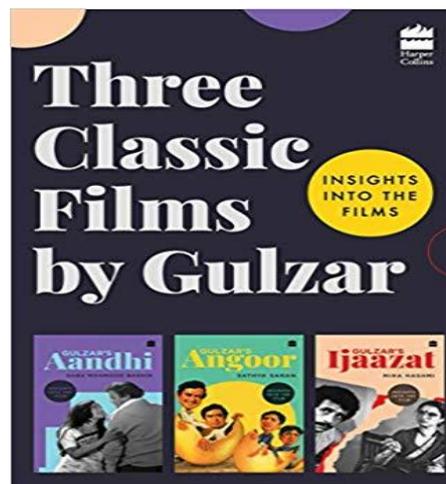
Book Review



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION
Combined Volumes (3: 2 & 4:1)
(ISSN 2454 -9495)
2019-2020

Three Classic Films by Gulzar: Insights into the Films (Box Set)

Gulzar's 'Aandhi' by Saba Mahmood Basir, *Gulzar's 'Angoor'* by Sathya Saran, and *Gulzar's 'Ijaazat'* by Mira Hashmi. Harper Collins India, 2019. Pp. 420, ISBN 978-9353028343, Price Rs. 999.



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The last few years have been quite productive for research on Indian and Hindi cinema. Various publishers have come out with books in diverse genres such as biography, autobiography, and non-fiction or criticism that engage with the multifaceted aspects of the making/production, circulation, and reception of films. Harper Collins India, strengthened by

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the able hands of Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri, appears to have taken a lead in this regard as it has produced a constant stream of noteworthy titles relating to Indian cinema including Anirudha Bhattacharjee and Balaji Vittal's *R.D. Burman: The Man, The Music* (2011), Jigna Kothari and Supriya Madangarli's *Gangs of Wasseypur: The Making of a Modern Classic* (2013), Parthajit Baruah's *Face to Face: The Cinema of Aloor Gopalakrishnan* (2014), and Shoma A. Chatterji's *Woman at the Window: The Material Universe of Rabindranath Tagore through the Eyes of Satyajit Ray* (2017).

In the light of the above, it is rather disappointing to discover that Harper Collins' latest 3-book set on Hindi cinema, *Three Classic Films by Gulzar: Insights into the Films*, does not quite live up to the standards set by the publisher. None of the three books- Saba Mahmood Basir's on 'Aandhi', Sathya Saran's on 'Angeer', and Mira Hashmi's on 'Ijaazat'- contribute anything new as such to a popular or critical understanding of Gulzar's films. They take an adulatory tone towards the celebrated filmmaker and writer and, as a result, are just nondescript additions to the spate of writing about him that has appeared in recent times. The primary cause for this, it appears to me, is the fact that they present to their readers Gulzar's journey as a filmmaker and lyricist in the form of a chapter within their narratives. I wonder if this is necessary at all for at least two reasons. One, that the Gulzar story is by now well-known to most lovers of Hindi cinema who have been ably aided in the endeavour by books like *Because He Is* (2004), *In the Company of a Poet: Gulzar in Conversation with Nasreen Munni Kabir* (2012), and *Jiya Jale: The Stories of Songs* (2018). Secondly, the chapter on Gulzar appears to break the flow of the narrative in all the three books as it ends up diverting attention from some other interesting point which is ultimately condemned to remain underdeveloped as a consequence.

Basir's book on 'Aandhi', perhaps the weakest of the three under review, begins by unnecessarily wading into a debate about the applicability of Western film-theory in an analysis of Indian films. It announces, "At the outset, I wish to declare that I believe in

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looking at Hindustani cinema based on Indian parameters...When a film is made *for* Indian audiences, it needs to be evaluated and understood from *their* perspective...I consciously attempt to look at Indian films through a certain innate Indian-ness.” (The author’s italics) Apart from the fact that the terms of such a debate not only imagine a homogeneous category called the ‘West’ but also sustain the ‘fiction’ of there being something essential about India(n) (cinema), one fails to see why it should be evoked within the book in the first place. The analysis of ‘Aandhi’ could have proceeded therein as well without making any reference to the West vs India question as the rest of the book doesn’t even care to reflect on how it had started anyway.

Moreover, no matter how hard one tries, one cannot find a single sustained argument in Basir’s book. It, for instance, states that ‘Aandhi’ is “not a political film” suggesting, I guess, that the film’s narrative is primarily concerned with presenting the story of the love (or the lack of it) between its protagonists Aarti (Devi) and JK. Just a few passages down, it praises ‘Aandhi’ for being a politically significant film where “even the undertones of romance were loaded with shades of politics.” Additionally, the organising principle underlying the book’s narrative does not come through clearly for its readers. The initial chapters, for instance, move through a boring and painful scene-by-scene description to establish what is really a simple point- that ‘Aandhi’ is the story of a tumultuous romantic relationship set in the context of a time that saw great socio-political churning in India.

The couple of interesting and half-decent points that the book presents come after the reader wades through an absolutely unnecessary description of the personal filmographic journeys of the all the actors in the film combined with summary-statements about their on-screen characters. One, that even as most of the story in ‘Aandhi’ is told through Aarti’s eyes, it seems that JK is uncomfortable with his wife’s political ambitions and would perhaps prefer that she be a homemaker. This discomfort emerges to the key reason for the way in which their marriage falls apart. Second, that the three songs in the film (apart from the *qawalli* that

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casts a satirical eye on the (ir)responsible behaviour of elected representatives towards their constituents) mirror the three phases of Aarti's life that its narrative presents i.e. a blossoming romance with JK and a rebellion against her father to marry according to her own choice, separation from the husband and journey into organised politics, and a hinted 'reconciliation' with the man that also comes topped with electoral success.

Saran's work on 'Angoor' is an attempt to establish that the film is a tightly-knit comedy whose diverse elements- gestures, lines, dialogues, and songs- cohere to not let anything seem out of place to its viewers. The exegesis of Gulzar's adaptation of William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* is helped by insights provided by Debu Sen, Tanuja, Deepti Naval, and Gulzar himself. However, what gives the analysis of 'Angoor' in the book a real, solid foundation is the praiseworthy manner in which Saran engages with what one could call the various historical contexts of 'Angoor' i.e. the sources from where Shakespeare drew the basic plot of *The Comedy of Errors*, the notable performances of the Shakespearean play in the West, and its six prominent adaptations for the silver screen in India. Among the Indian adaptations, 'Bhranti Bilash' and 'Do Dooni Chaar' justifiably receive the lion's share of Saran's attention as they serve as the primary sources for Gulzar's own adaptation.

In presenting the tale of two pairs of separated twins on screen, the primary challenge for Gulzar, as Saran rightly points out, was to have two sets of character-couples who looked similar to the other characters in the film but distinct to the audience. Gulzar plays an admirable hand in presenting this game of 'spot the difference' to his audiences as he always does something so as to enable them to realise as to who is it that they are seeing on the screen. Most of the time, the music in 'Angoor' aids his effort as the songs are well-integrated with the situations outlined by the screenplay (a notable example is Bahadur singing "Pritam aan milo..."). Additionally, the background score has been used to build-up comedy, seriousness, and suspense in the film's narrative.

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Saran's book concludes with an interesting discussion of the importance of dialogue in 'Angoor' and the absolutely vital relationship that the spoken-lines share with the humour evoked therein. As she points out, the repetition of phrases and words, the innovative play with word-stress, and delightful puns make the one thing mean so many different things that 'Angoor' makes most of its viewers laugh out loud. However, I find it strange that Saran doesn't point out the sexism that appears to have crept into some of the dialogues of the film. Take, for instance, this "witticism" from Mansoor Mia that, for Saran, "get[s] the gallery slapping their thighs in appreciation" but makes me rather uncomfortable: "*Biwi tobarah mahine mein baasi ho jaati hain, koi saali waali nahin hain unki?*" "(A wife becomes stale in twelve months; there must be a sister-in-law?)".

Hashmi's book on 'Ijaazat' opens with a refreshing and endearing description of the way in which she and her contemporaries accessed Indian cinema in Pakistan. As Indian films were banned in the neighbouring country for more than four decades, she had to rely on VHS copies and video-rentals from retail stores for accessing most Indian films including, of course, Gulzar's. As she describes, what she noticed and was intrigued by in Gulzar's cinema is its treatment of romantic love. Gulzar, she underlines, doesn't seem to understand a relationship to be constituted in its entirety by a romance that 'successfully' turns into a marriage. Rather, for him, romantic love and marriage are just components of a relationship that can go in any direction, often despite them. 'Ijaazat', as it turns out, is an excellent expression of the said sentiment as it presents the hackneyed trope of a love-triangle only to work with it in multiple ways to produce wonderful ends and possibilities that have rarely been witnessed in Hindi cinema ever since.

The third chapter of Hashmi's book titled '*Mera Kuch Saaman: The Making, the Memories*' is an interesting exploration not only of the source story of 'Ijaazat' entitled 'Jatugriha' (by Subodh Ghosh) that Gulzar adapted and made into his own but also of the many curious ways in which texts travel through diverse spaces and times. Part of the reason as to why Gulzar

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made significant changes to 'Jatugriha', for instance, was the fact that a long time had elapsed between him buying the rights for the film and actually making it. No one, for example, wanted to produce and finance a film in which the heroine (i.e. Sudha) was married from the start. Moreover, it was felt that Gulzar's representation of the 'other woman' (Maya) was a little too brave for its times and that he wasn't quite representing the man (i.e. Mahendra) in the triangular relationship in a way that would highlight so-called masculine 'authority'.

As Hashmi underlines, 'Ijaazat' was a difficult film to not only get financed but also make for it undid almost all the moulds that existed in Hindi cinema for representing characters in triangular romantic relationships. Maya, for instance, isn't the 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' as emblematised by Kirsten Dunst in Cameron Crowe's 'Elizabeth town' (2005). She is not an apparently emancipated woman whose presence in the narrative is merely to be the cipher for the expression of Mahendra's rather ordinary and deprived worldview. In fact, she periodically reminds him that she cannot be taken for granted and is unwilling to be the Penelope-like 'waiting woman' in the relationship. She is free-spirited, rebellious, and gives meaningful creative expression to her life through the exquisite poems she writes. Similarly, Sudha is not portrayed in 'Ijaazat' as the self-effacing, sacrificial wife for whom the husband and the marriage hold ultimate importance. Instead, she often reflects a mother-like attitude towards Maya as she understands that Maya needs Mahendra in her life. At the same time, she is also aware of Mahendra's predicament- he loves Maya but cannot give up on the person that he is wedded to. Ultimately, in a courageous display, she lets go of Mahendra by granting him the divorce that will allow him to be with Maya and, in the process, sets herself free to be with someone that she would like. Even Mahendra, for that matter, displays self-awareness about the fundamental folly in his character i.e. his inability to take a decision and act accordingly despite being able to acutely perceive a situation.

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Hashmi's book ends with remarks on the memorable music and songs in 'Ijaazat'. She underlines the fact that the combination of R.D. Burman and Gulzar not only brought a certain freshness to Hindi film music in general but also reached a new high in terms of their own partnership in the film. She establishes the latter claim through an examination of the four songs in the film- 'Mera Kuch Saaman', 'Chhoti Si Kahani Se', 'Katra Katra Milti Hai', and 'Khali Haath Shaam Aai Hai'- and the way in which they reflect the emotional states of the three characters. She rightly points out that the four songs of the film can be organised into pairs that immanently complement each other. 'Mera Kuch Saaman', for instance, is brilliantly coupled with 'Khali Haath Shaam Aai Hai' as they reflect the sentiments of Maya and Sudha respectively in dimly lit setting. Similarly, 'Katra Katra Milti Hai' and 'Chhoti Si Kahani Se' use the metaphor of (rain) drops to indicate the complexities and nuances of the triangular relationship in which the characters find themselves.

Thus, in the light of the above discussion, one could say that the readers of *Caesurae* will be well-advised to either wait for the price of this 3-book box-set to come down substantially (for Rs. 999 is clearly an overkill) or for Harper Collins to publish Hashmi's book on 'Ijaazat' separately as it clearly stands out among the trio of titles under review.
