



## **Hindu, Muslim and Christian syncretic cultural traditions as depicted in Shyam Benegal's 'Junoon'**

**Ravneet Gill Singh**

Assistant Professor, Department of History, MCM DAV College for Women, Chandigarh, Punjab, India

### **Abstract**

Junoon (Obsession) is a relatively obscure but masterly exposition of Hindi cinema, which serves as historical and cultural testimony to a significant time in Indian history. Set in North India in 1857, when the Indian war of independence broke out suddenly and swept across the land like a summer storm, the movie captures the poignancy and peril of the moment when the fate of British India trembled in the balance.

The movie provides a stunning vignette also of the three chief communities of India- Hindus, Muslims and Christians, as they existed in the period- in a very precise and representative manner. The movie presents a striking and realistic portrayal of several characters caught in the vortex of events that are beyond their control. What fascinates is the marked delineation and demarcation between the cultural contexts in which these characters function. The depiction of the mood, culture, behavior and conduct of the Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities at a turning point in Indian history affords a peek at a bygone era and makes the viewer feel both engaged and amazed at the wonderful detailing. Thus, Junoon becomes a cinematic odyssey into the life and times of an unspecified town in North India in which the action is set. This town becomes the representation of all small and large towns across India, similarly affected in 1857, and the characters become emblematic of the people who lived in these places.

This paper attempts to analytically perceive how the movie succeeds in demonstrating the historical reality, cultural contexts and unique ethos of the three largest and most conspicuous communities of the India of 1857.

**Keywords:** Hindu, Muslim, Christian, junoon (obsession)

### **Introduction**

It is an undeniable fact that cinema has a definite and intangible power to entertain, and also inform, enunciate, educate and generally act as a microcosm of life. The very nature of cinema makes it a highly influential and subtle medium that can reflect and sometimes, reinterpret reality. The events of the past that can never be witnessed again, can yet be enacted and brought to life through the medium of cinema. The immense power to move audiences that is inherent in the cinematic medium renders it a universally potent emotional tool that can evoke cultural memories and act as documentation of culture and history. In cinema, "There is no genre-less text" <sup>[1]</sup> says Jacques Derrida. This is the reason that even historical events and characters seem familiar and their trials and triumphs immediately relatable.

The movie is based on a Ruskin Bond novella "The Flight of pigeons" <sup>[2]</sup> Ruskin Bond, an Anglo Indian writer settled in India wrote the novella primarily as a love story, in which he gave a snapshot of the chaos, crisis and cultural clash that developed in the backdrop of the revolt of 1857. 1857 is increasingly being recognized as one of the most crucial events of British Indian history. The love story of an aristocratic Pathan Javed Khan and a young English girl Ruth Labadoor would be doomed in normal course of events as they make an unlikely couple and symbolize the clash of civilizations <sup>[3]</sup>. Circumstances conspire to bring them together in the initial days of the outbreak and turbulence of the revolt when the Indian rebels and soldiers were on the warpath against the British.

The novella itself is short but it was beautifully developed into a nuanced and detailed screenplay by the virtuoso Shyam Benegal. The project was produced by Shashi Kapoor who also played the lead role of Javed Khan. The cast was ensemble with Jennifer Kendall, Naseeruddin Shah, Shabana Azmi, Kulbhushan Kharbanda and Ismat Chughtai playing prominent roles, while Nafisa Ali made her debut in the lead role of Ruth. The direction of Shyam Benegal ensured that each character got ample space for a clear delineation and was able to be expressive and representative of the culture, thinking and context in which it was living. Govind Nihalani was the cinematographer and beautifully captured the mood of the times through the colours and play of light and shade which is the hallmark of the film. Both the Hindi and Urdu dialogues were colloquial and very apt. Pandit Satyadev Dubey wrote the Hindi dialogues while the Urdu dialogues were penned by eminent poet and author Ismat Chughtai who herself also essayed the role of the Indian maternal Grandmother of Ruth. The film released in 1978 and won the National Awards in 1979 for the Best Feature Film, Best cinematography and Best Audiography. The film swept the Filmfare Awards in 1980 and was screened at several International Film Festivals, including at Montreal, Cairo, Sydney, Melbourne, Moscow etc.

The backdrop of the film is the Revolt of 1857, when the aging Mughal 'King of Delhi' Bahadur Shah Zafar, was declared the Emperor of India by the rebellious soldiers who propped him as a figurehead and flocked under his banner. "Every period has great men and if these are lacking, it

invents them”, says Claude Adrien Helvétius <sup>[4]</sup>. Zafar had this role thrust upon him, and was swept along the current with the rest of North India at the time. The revolt was the last ditch struggle of the Muslims to reinforce their political, social and economic hegemony and the movie faithfully portrays the facts and events in a historically well informed and cogent form.

When looked at as a historical and cultural account, the movie begins to unravel the threads of Hindu-Muslim-Christian intercultural dynamics as they existed in 1857. The cultural homogeneity and *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* <sup>[5]</sup> had already developed and syncretic traditions were a part and parcel of everyday life. For example- the scene in which Lala Ramji Lal, who represents the Hindu element of society is visited in his home by a Pathan friend. The language in which they converse is chaste Urdu, while both sit together familiarly and partake of paan from the same dish. They even share a common hookah, only changing the mouthpiece every time it passes between them. The *chachi* or aunt of Javed Khan is shown to be a Hindu girl who has since converted to Islam since her marriage and become totally adapted to muslim culture. These small details presents eloquently and beautifully the amity and accord that existed between the two communities who had lived together for centuries before this accord was disrupted as a part of the known policy of ‘Divide and rule’ practiced by the British. “... colonial authorities adopted a policy of ‘divide and rule’ allied to territorial separation. One community was separated from another...governments divided and re-divided populations into discrete groups, on the basis of linguistics, religion, ethnicity and skin colour. officials operated on the assumption that the groups so distinguished were distinct entities, to be treated differently...” <sup>[6]</sup>.

The movie starts with a Qawalli by Amir Khusro in which he invokes Nizzammuddin Auliya, one of the patron saints of Delhi and one of the most prominent Sufis of India. The qawalli itself, in Khari Boli represents the spiritual unity that underlies every religion and the scene pictures both Muslims and Hindus listening to the same and feeling emotionally and spiritually moved.

Coming to the specifics of the three cultures represented, the accountant Lala Ramji Lal who comes to the rescue of the British ladies who are the only survivors of the massacre that was perpetuated by the Indian soldiers in the Church where the British have collected in large numbers for the Sunday service is played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda. He is shown immersed in Hindu culture, but considers it his religious and moral duty to safeguard the lives of the three women who are the family of his benefactor- Mr Labadoor. He proves ‘true to the salt’ or *Namak-halal* by saving the lives of the three Labadoor women even at the risk to his own life and family. He proves to be totally trustworthy and loyal as he brings them to his house, which is situated in a typical Hindu Mohalla. The streets are narrow, and the house is set around the central courtyard in which the cow is also sheltered as an honoured member of the family.

The Tulsi <sup>[7]</sup> Platform in the centre of the courtyard declares the religion of the family and the old Matriarch, Ramji Lal’s mother is shown constantly reciting the Ram Charit Manas in front of the small temple or mandir in the house. She is a

widow dressed in white and speaks in Bhojpuri, as the town in which they are living is set in Northern Provinces or modern UP. Ramji Lal’s wife is shown to be quiet but manages to show her innate humanity through her kind gestures and friendly attitude towards the unwelcome guests in the form of the three British women. The maid servant of the family, who is shown to be a local woman is also representative of her class and also of the manner in which the English were perceived by the lower classes and castes in India. She is quite vocal and informal in her dealings with the British women. The scene where they are all eating and she rushes to bring them huge serving spoons to eat with instead of spoons is quite telling. She knows that the English did not eat with their hands as the Indians did, but is unable to distinguish between a ladle and a spoon. Anyway, ladles are all she can find in the typical Indian kitchen which does not have English cutlery.

Ramji Lal’s character is shown to be timid, respectful, cultured and humane. He speaks in Bhojpuri with his own family, but effortlessly switches to Urdu with his guests and others. He is shown to be enterprising and ingenious and does not hesitate from taking drastic steps such as burying the Indian soldier who attacks them in the middle of the night and is killed by Miriam (Ruth’s mother- Played by Jennifer Kendall) in the courtyard of his own house to prevent any suspicion. When he is suspected of harbouring the English women and Javed Khan comes to his house to demand their surrender, he boldly declares that Javed Khan should cut his head first and then enter his house.

Purdah system was an essential part of Muslim culture but was not practiced as assiduously by the Hindus, but this aspect is brought out beautifully in the movie when Javed Khan and others come to the house to search it and Javed declares at the threshold that women inside should be in *Purdah*. The Hindu women do not disappear from sight, but draw the veils across their faces and the maid servant in particular is quite restless. When Javed Khan succeeds in taking away the women to his house in the absence of Ramji Lal, the former host comes to Javed’s house and with perfect composure and candour informs him that had he been present he would have died protecting his guests rather than surrender them. To which Javed replies that he knows it and that is why they took the guests away in Ramji’s absence. Ramji perceives the protection of his guests as his Dharma and explains it in so many words to his mother when she also asks him to throw them out. To the end, Ramji tries to perform his duty as per Dharma and tells Miriam that he will travel to Agra to inform her brother about them all. His non-involvement, fair dealing, loyalty and enterprising nature are the key traits that were very true for all the educated Hindus of the day who were employed by the English but who had also worked under the old Muslim regime.

The revolt of 1857 was condemned by the British as a predominantly Muslim lead and fuelled revolt and the entire muslim community was treated with suspicion and disdain for years after 1857 as a result. This is collaborated by the diary of famous poet Mirza Ghalib “Dastambo” <sup>[8]</sup> written in Persian. Mirza Ghalib was an eyewitness who lived through this turbulent time in Delhi and in Dastambu he mentions several times how the muslims were punished for the revolt of 1857 after it was successfully crushed by the British. It was

only with the emergence of the Congress Party, which was Hindu dominated that the Muslims again were brought out of the cold by the English to be propped up as antidotes to the increasing clamour for independence.

In this movie, Muslims are shown to be the prime instigators and participants of the revolt. Right from the characterization to the locales to the haveli of Javed Khan, one can easily see that the glory days of the Mughals are long gone, as the Muslims in the film try hard to hold onto the past glories in a fast changing world. From the frequent references to the Mughal emperor, to the sense of outrage and injustice at the English to the clamouring to take to arms as a last resort to not only reclaim lost glory and power, but also reenact the glorious days of Muslim victories, the movie has countless references to the state of the muslim aristocracy in 1857, which was smarting chaffing at the loss of power to the English and eager to 'do or die' to snatch back their lost hegemony. The scenes and dialogues faithfully and accurately depict the overall atmosphere of desperation, despondency but frantic optimism that was experienced at the beginning of the revolt when the rebels met with initial success. The mood in the film becomes more urgent and dark as the British reassert their power and the rebels are slowly but surely faced with certain defeat. The attitudes and desperate courage of the characters of Naseeruddin Shah, Benjamin Gilani and even Shashi Kapoor as they bravely and finally face their certain fate of death shows how the muslims at the time perceived the revolt of 1857 as a final chance to avenge the humiliation and loss of prestige, status and wealth they had suffered at the hands of the British.

Poised at the brink of immense historical change, the attitude of remote curiosity, spirit of demoralization, realization of defeat and these sense of their own weakness that had already permeated the muslim aristocracy is depicted by Javed Khan on one hand, while the desperation, great resolve to 'do or die' and last ditch attempt to regain lost power, regardless of the consequences is represented by the character of Sarfaraz Khan (Naserruddin Shah) who is shown as a rebel leader, prime mover and recruiter who is totally focused on making the rebellion a success. Sarfaraz Khan constantly berates and rails against the other Pathans, aristocrats and Mughals who he says, are so busy doing nothing and spending their time in pointless pursuits such as kite-flying and pigeon keeping when the entire country is fighting to fend off the English invaders. He is wild with anger at his brother in law Javed Khan whom he thinks is indolent and too involved in his obsession or Junoon with Ruth Labadoor to see the criticality and danger which makes the Indian cause so precarious. He wants Javed Khan to join him in the battles against the Ferengi and invokes the past glories of their race many a time. In the scene towards the end, where he returns from a battle that the Indians loose against the English, and hurls abuses at the pigeons and harms and flings down several as he considers the pigeons to be the symbol of the degeneration, indolence and loss of vigour which results in the defeat of the Indians.

The inter-racial configurations are very apparent as in the conversion of the Chachi, played by an effervescent Sushma Seth and the love story of Ruth and Javed. The attitude of acceptance on the part of the family of Javed is reflective of

the norms of the day when polygamy was a usual and socially acceptable fact.

The muslim locality in the movie and Javed Khan's Haveli are spacious but dilapidated, expressing that the power and wealth behind such grandeur is declining. The Haveli needs repair and looks old, worn and worse for wear, depicting the state of its inhabitants. The martial or Pathan identity of the residents is invoked and remembered in several scenes, reiterating how the muslims, who belonged to the former ruling class under the several centuries of Islamic rule in India, were now learning to reconcile themselves to the changing circumstances, but not without deep heartburn and only with extreme reluctance.

In fact, the key point in the movie comes when Javed makes a verbal pact with Miriam that if the rebels win the battle for Delhi and defeat the English, then she would agree to his marriage with Ruth. The importance given to his word as a pathan and the fact that he keeps up social graces and behaves with restraint and respect towards the English women, even though they are in his complete power shows the concept of "Zabaan dena", hospitality and not harming someone while they are under one's roof and instinctive goodness and generosity of Indians of the age. It is only when Delhi is lost and Javed realizes that he has also lost Ruth that he joins the rebels as a final and desperate act to redeem himself. He realizes that he has been so busy with the matters of the heart that he had completely removed himself from the criticality of the struggle that was taking place all around him. With the prospect of Ruth gone, he resigns himself to certain death on the battle field rather than suffer the humiliation and disdain from his own race who would have never let him forget as long as he lived that he had let down his side at a crucial time. Christian element in the movie is primarily represented by the Mother and Daughter duo, as the maternal grandmother is supposed to be a muslim aristocrat from the Rampur royal family. This harked back to the time in the initial days of the British arrival in India, when the English married Indian women as a socially acceptable practice. As William Dalrymple<sup>[9]</sup> observes in his book "White Mughals", it is only after the arrival of English women from England, that this practice was discontinued. In 1857, there were a large number of Indian women who had been married to English men in the early years of the nineteenth century, and Ruth's grandmother represents these women, who had nominally converted to Christianity but continued to follow the beliefs and lifestyles of the natives. In the beginning of the film, Ismat Chughtai who plays the grandmother is shown talking to her daughter in Urdu and asking her to ensure that Indian traditional dishes such as Sevaiyyan is made the next day as it is Id. Her dress, mannerisms, demeanor and outlook is inherently muslim and she presents the unique and accurate portrayal of the women who were mothers and wives to the English but remained Indian in heart and manner. The disdain and contempt with which she is treated by her son-in-law, Ruth's father, who resents her for being Indian is amply narrated when he says, "Tell your mother in a language which she can understand", obviously referring to the fact that she only converses in Urdu. This fact of the grandmother's Indian identity, however, become very crucial when the women are driven out from

their spacious white bungalows in the segregated and privileged part of the town, reserved for the English, with quiet lanes and huge gardens and thrown into the rough and tumble of first Ramji Lal's house and then Javed's haveli. When the family of both Ramji Lal and Javed discovers that the grandmother is an Indian lady of good family, the attitude and behavior of both the Hindu and Muslim families changes. Their tone becomes gentler and the women are asked to take a seat. The fact that Miriam can speak Urdu causes astonishment at first, but is very significant for making her acceptable in the Indian homes. The matter of the dress of the British being considered 'vulgar and ugly' by the Indians comes to light when Javed demands the women in his family to provide the English women with 'decent' Indian clothes.

Another scene which brings out the stark cultural contrast happens when during the spring picnic in a mango orchard, the Indian daughter in law of the *Chachi* renders a beautiful folk song on the beauties of spring in lilting rhythms while the English women sing an English song that is considered highly peculiar by the Indian ladies. The way flowers have different cultural contexts in the three different cultures is rendered clearly when Ruth is shown picking blooms in her garden for setting in vases, while Ramji Lal's mother strings white mogra for dedicating in her temple while Javed's wife strings them together to be worn as a 'gajra'.

The scenes at Ruth's house, garden and the church present very precise snapshot of how the English had created oasis of quiet and splendid isolation in the midst of the Indian landscape. The bungalows were large and commodious and surrounded by large well kept gardens, while the Indians, even Javed's class, lived in dilapidated structures pressed close together, mostly without any beauty or privacy.

When viewed in the cultural and historical context, Junoon is one for the ages as the sun burnt, baked earth vistas, colonial and Mughal buildings and the wonderfully alive, vibrant and vivacious characters seem so true to life, and so difficult to imagine, let alone find, these days that they spring out from the screen with a rare vitality and vivacity. This movie is remarkable for the ultra-realistic, engaging and very stark way in which it manages to present an honest and succulent exposition of the situations and circumstances as they existed at that moment in time. The film depicts the mood of the three main communities at a turning point in Indian history. It serves almost as visual evidence of the ways of living, attitudes and outlook of the three main communities. Through countless minor details, the movie is able to present small nuances and little mannerisms which are very telling and demonstrative, just leaving an indelible, profound and very engaging imprint on the sands of time and history.

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