

Vol. 8, Issue-VIII (July 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

On the Outskirts of the Middle Class Consciousness: A Žižekian Reading of *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa*

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Article History: Submitted-01/06/2017, Revised-11/07/2017, Accepted-19/07/2017, Published-31/07/2017.

Abstract:

Violence is deceptive because of its tremendous power to conceal itself. It has remained a challenge for intellectuals to research and theorize its hidden, concealed and many-sided forms. The present paper analyses the film *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa* from the Žižekian perspective to interrogate the common perception of violence and ethics. The film is read in the background of the systemic exclusion of poor people from their land. The struggle that was once against the feudal structure is found to be replaced with the struggle against global capitalism. In place of the ‘Zamindaars’ of 60s, the MNCs are perceived as villain in 90s. In both the contexts, the apolitical character of the larger bulk of masses is perceived as part of objective violence. A hope somewhat spreads over the entire cinematic text that the walls of the middle class consciousness can be dismantled and that this large section of the society can come out of the bubble of its beliefs so as to see honestly what befalls on the outskirts of its cocooned life. The symbolic violence done to naxal identity by popular media and political speeches becomes another aspect of objective violence that has been explored in the paper. The film criticizes the middle class at large but also gives some hope of ethical act from this class.

Keywords: Violence, symbolic/objective violence, ethics of the real, naxalism, film study, Žižekian studies.

The word ‘development’ haunts millions of people in India, especially the poor adivasi and tribals. They believe that development stands not only for the construction of roads and buildings, but also for their displacement from their own land. They know that they would have to search for other means of survival and that they would have to invent a new way of life. The word development is the favorite buzz-word of politicians, middle class people and businessmen, especially the owners of mining companies who gratify their greed under the comforting shade of this word. Owing to this, it seems that greed and hunger go hand in hand with development in India. The powerful and the rich operate under the garb of economic development whereas the poor and the dispossessed fight for survival and justice. The battle is on and, in fact, has become more complex because of the mixture of slogans of freedom, equality and justice on both sides.

In this ongoing battle, the role of the middle class has remained a subject of critical enquiry. This class, which is “below the two percent of the very rich, and above the three

hundred million consisting of those below the poverty line plus the two hundred million or so who may not be destitute but are still very poor” (Verma xviii), has remained, to a larger extent, supportive of the greedy spirit of the shady pursuits of the halves of the society. Nevertheless, a small fraction of this class does remain sensitive to the issue of poverty and the struggle of the poor people. They raise their voice against economic exploitation through various modes, work for social justice, carry out charity work and criticize the insensitive character of their own class. Keeping this in mind, it can be said that the middle class is not, altogether, fixed to a certain identity. Its identity is uncontrolled, open and fluid so that it can flow towards any direction-right or left in the political context.

This small sensitive core of the middle class identity appears to be the target of *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa*. A hope somewhat spreads over the entire cinematic text that the walls of the middle class consciousness can be dismantled and that this large section of the society can come out of the bubble of its beliefs so as to see honestly what befalls on the outskirts of its cocooned life. The outskirts, as the film reveals, is a site of struggle against economic exploitation and social injustice carried forward by those who dare to dream of a world offering equality, freedom, justice and dignity to all. Ironically, these people are the naxalites who are “the single biggest internal security challenge” (Roy 4) for some and “Gandhian” (Roy 60) for others. *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa* narrates the story of these people in a way so that the sensitive chord of the middle class psyche gets touched and disturbed.

The film focusses on Sujata Chatterjee, a bank employee, who loses her youngest son named Brati in a police encounter. Sujata is asked to identify Brati’s corpse numbered 1084. She comes to know that her son was a naxalite who has been killed for his involvement in anti-government activities. She could not accept her son’s identification as a terrorist and also as a lifeless number. Unlike other members of her family who try to erase Brati from their memories, she tries to understand Brati’s struggle and meets his girlfriend Nandini Mitra who talks about Brati’s political vision. She also meets Somu’s (Brati’s friend) mother and tries to make sense of the other life that her son was living. Sujata recalls her memories and starts comparing Brati’s ideals with the bourgeois ideals dominating her life. Consequently, she finds it very suffocating to live by her bourgeois ideals. In the end, she decides to fight for the ideals believed in by her son.

Sujata becomes a focal point in the film. It is through her observations, introspection and analyses that the story of Brati unfolds. Clearly, the audience imagined during the creation of this film is the middle class that cannot easily identify itself with a naxalite but can do so with Sujata who has much in common with the bourgeoisie including her apolitical nature, uncritical innocence and ignorance. This narrative technique makes audience join hands with the central character making him/her behold the world as it gets narrated. Sujata’s consciousness is shown to move from innocence to experience, her character from being apolitical to political, her mind from ignorance to knowledge; and the same is expected from the audience.

This sense of the audience affects the choice of the title of the film. It is not solely *Hazaar Chaurasi* but *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa*- which means, the film is not only about naxalism but also about the relationship of naxalism with the middle class consciousness which on one hand gives birth to it while on the other, has the potential to understand, sympathize with and do something to remedy it. In this sense, half of the title reflects the dehumanized state of the naxalites which is constructed through political speeches and popular media and accepted by a large bulk of people in their uncritical innocence. The other half of the title signifies the traits of love and compassion which have remained central to defining humanity. Thus, within itself, the title presents the forces of dehumanization and humanization struggling forth to approach the world of naxalites. The film favours the latter. The word Maa (mother) acts as an emotional appeal that persuades the audience to approach the world of the dehumanized rebels in a humane way. At the same time, the title makes a logical appeal to make people think about the cause (mother) of naxalism.

Sujata, as a mother, becomes a powerful symbol serving different purposes. At one level, her presence serves as an artistic mode to make people deem naxalites as individuals who belong to the society and whose sufferings must be felt as one's own. At another level, Sujata's character makes people take responsibility for the birth of naxalism since it is born of oppression and exclusion. At yet another level, this symbol serves as the creative potential inherent in Indian soul that can give birth to a new identity which can, in turn, lead India to a better future. Thus, the word Maa (mother) embodies emotional appeal, responsibility and creative potential.

Sujata's role as a wife is symbolic too. Her husband, Mr. Dibyanath Chatterjee, has been represented as the embodiment of bourgeois values. He believes in personal growth through selfish means and legitimizes poverty, corruption and social hierarchy. Traditionally, in the Indian patriarchal social structure, a wife submissively accepts the dominance of her husband. Sujata's marriage to Mr. Chatterji can be read symbolically as a marriage of the Indian soul to the bourgeois values with the dominance of the latter. Her job as a banker is also suggestive of the dominance of the bourgeois values that make economy control politics in India. Sujata is employed in a bank and lacks political consciousness. Clearly, the dominance of the bourgeois thinking over Indian soul results in the repression of the sense of justice. This symbolic representation is not far from the observation of Pavan K. Verma who describes the dominance of middle class thinking from the very beginning of India's independence to the present times in his book *The Great Indian Middle Class*. He writes, "The middle class was itself greatly responsible for the inadequate implementation of Nehru's vision of a socialist India. It was unwilling to sacrifice its class interests even if it believed that the policies of the State in favour of the poor were justified" (83).

Sujata gives birth to four children: Jyoti, Brati, Nipa and Tuli. Three out of these continue to remain under the dominance of the bourgeois values, but Brati becomes a naxalite. Naxalism (Brati), in this sense, is nothing but the son of bourgeois thinking (Mr. Chatterjee) and the

apolitical/uncritical character of Indian masses (Sujata). The apolitical people are sunk in the symbolic world of their own that constructs a narrower consciousness which does not let them see the consequences of the values they hold. This is what Harsh Mander observes in this regard, “I realized then that many middle-class and wealthy young are being raised in ways that seal them off in bubbles where the only reality that registers on their hearts and minds is their own” (xxiii). Only one child of Sujata could burst this bubble and allowed his consciousness to grow unlike his siblings. It was Brati who did not accept the world represented to him as reality. Brati symbolically signifies the small fraction of the middle class that is sensitive to the problems of the poor people, and is willing to change the structure of the symbolic reality.

Reality, in this sense, is not objective and complete. It is an effect of the language loaded with certain perceptions, beliefs and values. There is an unexplored excess of it which remains unavailable to the senses serving within the sphere of the perceived, symbolic reality. This excess is called the real. As Lacan observes, “...it (real) is radically distinguished from the symbolic and the imaginary- the real is the impossible. Not in the name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible” (*The Other* 123). This excess is the excess of the asserted truth and reasoning of the symbolic reality. The role of the real is to disturb reality and, thereby to reveal its fragmented nature. This is what happens in Sujata’s life after the news of Brati’s death. She realized her ignorance of the world around and the existence of a world that was unknown to her. After Brati’s death, she could see the real Brati by letting herself peep through the cracks of her symbolic world.

The beginning of the film foregrounds the encounter of the reality of Sujata’s life with its real which dismantles the walls of her normalized perception of the world. In the beginning, Sujata’s slumber gets disturbed by the ringing tone of the phone. She attends the call and receives the information that she has to come to Kantakapur for the identification of Brati. In her ignorance, she could not understand that Kantakapur is a place where the police morgue is situated. Later, she comes to know that Brati has been killed in a police encounter. The phone call symbolically becomes emergence of the real in her life. It was the call of the other world that was not available to her consciousness earlier. Her slumber also becomes symbolic of the ignorance of the apolitical people who fail to see the broader picture of the world full of sufferings and struggles. The night she spent sleeping was the night when Brati was battling for his life. The shot showing her in slumber (Fig 1) is creatively edited with the shot displaying the photographs of religious figures (Fig 2). This reminds the viewer of the famous Marxist description of religion being the opium of masses. This does not mean that the film is a criticism of religion as such, but it is a criticism of all the forces which make the middle classes live in their cocooned life by blocking their view to the struggles of the oppressed and the marginalised.



Fig. 1&2 Montage of signifiers of slumber and opium of people

The emergence of the real activates, at the same time, the forces which aim to repress the real so as to keep the so-called normalized state of things undisturbed. Brati's father and his siblings try to repress the news of Brati's police encounter. They use their money and political links to ensure that Brati's name does not appear in the newspapers among the naxalites killed by the police. They know that the publication of this news will not let them maintain their image of belonging to the 'bhadrakok'. They repressed the news and returned to their normal(ized) life. The process of erasing Brati from memories was on in the family. Similar was the case of the whole of the 'bhadrakok' that represses naxalite spirit by devaluing it at the ideological level and by encouraging violence against it at the political level.

It is the status quo that naxalites approach violently since they perceive violence to be inherent in it. This kind of violence, in Žižekian sense, is the objective violence which is different from the subjective one. In subjective violence, the violent agent can be identified clearly, while objective violence is performed by the socio-political structure lived by its social agents. Žižek argues that subjective violence is generally seen from a non-violent zero level of existence as if there is a normal peaceful state of life which is disturbed by subjective violence. The idea of objective violence negates this perception of non-violent zero level of existence. As Žižek writes, "It (subjective violence) is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal' peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things" (2).

It is noteworthy that Sujata refuses to return to the normal state of things and allows herself to perceive the broader horizon of her consciousness by listening to the people who were earlier 'others' for her like Brati's girlfriend Nandini (Fig 3), Brati's friend's mother (Fig 4) and Brati himself as a naxal (Fig 5). She recalls Brati's memories in order to listen to him. She remembers the time when Brati shared with her his utopian dream of a world of equality, justice and dignity for all. She heard the words but did not pay attention to them. Brati as a naxalite remains unknown to her. Now, after his death, she tries making sense of the other world— that was unknown to her and she had never tried to explore it till it affected her own world. She comes closer to the world that was on the margins - the outskirts of her consciousness. A journey towards her unconscious begins. She takes the position of a narratee and listens to the stories which had been unavailable to her consciousness earlier. The stories of the other world make her introspect her relation with it. There are various scenes in the film which represent Sujata as a

narratee who listens to the narrators generally repressed by the discursive practices geared to maintaining the status quo.



Fig 3,4 & 5 Role of narrator and narratee generally repressed in popular discourse

These narrators in the film stand against the narrators active in the outside world. The audience, aligned artistically with the character of Sujata, is made to listen to these repressed viewpoints so as to rethink the popular beliefs and notions. In popular discourse, the narrators are different. They narrate the stories representing naxalites as criminals, terrorists, ignorant, misguided, anti-social as well as anti-national. These narrators repress the dream of freedom and equality as expressed by Brati; hide the sufferings generated by poverty as reflected by Somu's mother; and legitimize the torture suffered by Nandini in the prison. Within the film, this point of view gets reflected through the words and actions of some of the characters. The Police inspector, who tortured Nandini in the prison, used words like 'gunda' and 'criminal' for naxals. He was convinced that naxals must be tortured brutally because they deserve this and nothing else. He also tells Sujata that she might not have brought up Brati well and this is the reason he turned out to be a 'gunda'. Equating naxals with criminals is to hide the valid purposes they fight for. Brati's father exhibits the same perception. At one juncture, he tries to convince Brati that his poor friends are poor because they are not hard-working and intelligent enough. He advises Brati to focus on his personal growth and not to waste time with his naxal friends who are "so stupid that they do not want to succeed in life". He advises his son, "Wealth is the mother of all happiness in life." For him, Brati was on a wrong track. The right track amounts to accumulating wealth and enjoying life. Similar are the views of many others who attend the party at Mr. Chatterji's home.

The symbolic representation of this common perception is the number '1084' on Brati's corpse (Fig 6). The number is an emotionless entity. For the official proceedings it is normal to number the corpse, but the cinematic narration makes a mother see number on her son's body. She feels the reduction of Brati's identity to a dehumanized state. What was normal and necessary to her common sense tortures her now. The audience is made to feel her pain. She is not allowed to take Brati's dead body home for a proper funeral. This is reducing naxal identity to a dehumanized state where it is completely deprived of the rights offered to humans by cultural norms. Like many others, Brati's dead body is not offered to fire, but simply burnt away (Fig 7).

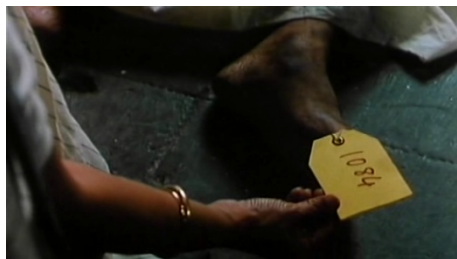


Fig 6 Dehumanized state



Fig 7 Improper funeral of rebels

A similar narration travels through various channels and keeps constructing the perception of the masses. Now and then, the news about the killing or looting by naxals flashes on the newspapers without the naxals' viewpoints. The image that is being constructed is not that of the poor people who are trying to save their land from being sold to mining companies; who have no belief whatsoever in the concept of land acquisition in the name of development; who refuse to get displaced like millions of others who got dispossessed earlier; and who want equality and justice. Rather the image is that of cruel, irrational, undemocratic and anti-development people. Popular media either give space to this violent and ruthless face of naxalism or do not give it any. That is why, there are a large number of TV channels to entertain people, to satisfy middle class peoples' religious sentiments, to give minute details of the stock market; however, the channels representing the fears, worries, anger, demands and dreams of poor adivasis, rural and tribal people are missing. The alternative model that the naxals talk about is not considered to be a popular issue at all. Naxalites' success in eradicating discriminations on the basis of caste, class and gender as well as their contribution in the field of education are the repressed news. They fail to buy media for representing their viewpoints regarding the news spread in the name of naxal violence. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the issue of naxalism carries no dialogue in the popular media.

Similar is the case of political speeches. In these times, when Indian politics seems to be a personality driven one, the words of politicians matter a lot. The words of the PM having an image of a highly qualified scholar are important as also the point of view of the PM having '56 inch chest'. Dr. Manmohan Singh evaluates naxalism as the 'biggest challenge' to India whereas Mr. Modi assures people that "the macabre drama of death will end" (The Tribune). Mr. Lal Krishan Advani invites all political parties and sections of society to act jointly "to eliminate this cancerous foreign implant from our body politic" (740).

These popular narrators, having the privilege to let their words flow through various channels, construct symbolic reality based on the principle of exclusion. This is what Žižek calls symbolic violence that is an effect of language. He writes:

Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is

ultimately external to it. When we name gold “gold”, we violently extract a metal from its natural texture, investing into it our dreams of wealth, power, spiritual purity, and so on, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the immediate reality of gold. (61)

Calling naxals ‘cancerous foreign implant’ is not simply a meaning thrown upon the word ‘naxal’ but also upon ‘India’. What is inherent in Mr. Advani’s phrase is the fixed sense of what ‘India’ means and what can be ‘foreign’ to her. Though the definition of India is not put in words, comprehensively, ever; yet it remains implied in the discourse of right wing politicians when they, very easily, define ‘other’ or ‘foreign’ e.g. western other, Muslim other or naxalite other.

For PM Modi, naxals are nothing but the mindless actors of the ‘drama of death’ who obstruct development projects. Ironically, the victims of development projects may use the same words to express their struggle for survival. They, themselves, wait for the closure of the ‘macabre drama of death’ run by capitalism. Similarly, if justice and equality are Indian ideals, then, ‘the biggest challenge’ of India can be perceived as her biggest hope. But, this other side of the argument remains unspoken and unacknowledged in the popular discourse.

Control over language generates the social structure that is inherently violent. The time when naxalbari movement influenced the Indian political discourse was the time of oppressive feudal structure of Indian society. Land owners were powerful enough to exploit poor farmers who were reduced to the level of debtors. Survival of debtors was based upon the will of their creditors. Social structure based on this relation of farmers and landlords in the form of debtors and creditors has been described through classic Indian films like *Do Beegha Zameen* and *Mother India*. The oppressive social structure of those times unleashed the revolutionary spirit in 1967 in the name of naxalbari movement.

Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa represents state violence against naxals. It is the violence that maintains the status quo. Brati and his friends are murdered by the local bandits who represent the state sponsored group of local people called Salwa Judum in naxal affected areas. Nandini is shown being tortured by police in the prison. She is beaten brutally and then raped. Police did this because it was allowed to do this. This threat and torture is a part of the state strategies to repress the rebels. Arundhati Roy narrates a case of an adivasi school teacher named Soni Sori who “was arrested and tortured in police custody. Stones were pushed up her vagina to get her to ‘confess’ that she was a Maoist courier” (152). The superintendent of police, in this case, was rewarded with the “President’s Police Medal for Gallantry on Republic Day” (Roy 152). Reward is encouragement of certain behaviour. Clearly, the desired behaviour, as expected by the state, is the unopposed acceptance of its policies by the rural people even if these policies mean displacement, poverty, alienation or humiliation. Rebels are subject to punishment since they oppose the normalized norm of selling and buying.

This spirit, which rose up at one time against oppression with the slogan of ‘land for tillers’, still survives, saving land for poor people. The fight is now with the MNCs which look greedily on the mineral rich land that is home to the rural tribal folks. The symbolic violence discussed above creates the conditions in which the state legitimizes militarization in the naxal affected areas and tries to vacate the region of these rebels so that this land could be sold to mining companies. Politicians, who are supposed to fight for the poor people, have their own share in the mining companies. The spirit for ‘land distribution’ faces challenges from all kinds of intentions of ‘land acquisition’. Paradoxically, the Indian state prefers the latter in the name of development. This friendship of economy and politics is well observed by Paranjoy Guha Thakurta when he raises doubts about Mr. Chidambaram’s linkages with the mining company Vedanta. He writes:

What are we to make of the fact that the Union home minister, P. Chidambaram, the CEO of Operation Green Hunt, has, in his career as a lawyer, represented several mining corporations? What are we to make of the fact that he was a non-executive director of Vedanta- a position from which he resigned the day he became finance minister in 2004? What are we to make of the fact that, when he became finance minister, one of the first clearance he gave for foreign direct investment was to Twinstar Holdings, a Mauritius-based company, to buy shares in Sterlite, a part of the Vedanta group? (qtd in *Broken Republic* 20)

Vis-à-vis this nexus of the powerful ones, the struggle of the naxals seems to be that of the poorest of the poor. They are too poor to buy some shares of TV channels or newspapers to let their stories be narrated from their point of view. They are too poor to satisfy the greed of politicians for winning favours in policy making. The present scenario of spending hundreds of crores in elections discourages them to even take part in the elections. What the poor cannot buy is bought by the richest ones and then used to construct reality that is extremely oppressive by nature.

Sujata, as a narratee, allows herself to perceive violence all around her. She realizes violence in the very way of life she used to regard as normal. Her dialogue with Nandini becomes relevant here:

Nandini: Do you know what hurt me the most when I came out of prison

Sujata: Tell me Nandini!

Nandini: To see that everything around was like in order. In official language ‘normal’. It was the talk of the town that the evil era is over now.

Sujata: Isn’t it that there is peace, comparatively?

Nandini: No! no, no, no! Don't say that. There was no peace earlier and there will not be. It is just silence in police morgue. It is a silky cover on a corpse coated in blood. This is not peace, Maashi maa! This is not peace.

Nandini's words starkly differentiate between silence and peace. The middle class perception makes Sujata refer to peace in the society. Nandini refutes this perception by directing Sujata's attention towards the fact of Brati's death. The so-called peace is nothing but 'the silence in police morgue' which symbolically means that rebels' voices are brutally silenced so as to hide the violent face of the so-called, peaceful state of things. Peace for some is oppression for multitudes. Peace is, thus, just a beautiful word or a 'silky cover' hiding systemic brutality underneath it.

Sujata's journey from uncritical innocence to experience makes her analyze her own 'self'. She finds her 'self' as a component of bourgeois ideology displayed by the behaviour of people of her own class in the party scene. This is the day of her daughter's wedding reception. This was also the day when Brati was killed. The day of mourning gets replaced by the day of celebration. Brati as a naxal becomes the subject of criticism, sympathy as well as poetic gratification. But the entire discussion is a part of entertainment for the people who never fight against oppression as Brati did. Sujata stood at a distance, looking at these people laughing, gossiping, drinking and dancing (Fig 8). This distance is not only an outer one, but inner also. She realizes that, though, she was apparently apolitical by nature, yet she was always a carrier of certain values. She was unknowingly a supporter of certain kind of socio-political ideology that went on repressing Brati's dream. This is the moment when Sujata feels a sharp pain and her appendix bursts. Symbolically, this is her psychic revolt to her own 'self'; her rejection of the given consciousness; her choice to be 'other'. The scene is creatively edited with a shot of the moment she became a mother. Sujata as a mother, here, symbolically represents her creative potential, to give birth to a new identity. The bursting of appendix is the end of her earlier identity. Her new identity emerges that does not accompany people in the bourgeois party, instead, she looks at the spectre of Brati (Fig 9), sharing his dream, becoming his comrade. In the end, she moves to the outskirts of her middle class consciousness, the margins of the bourgeoisie.

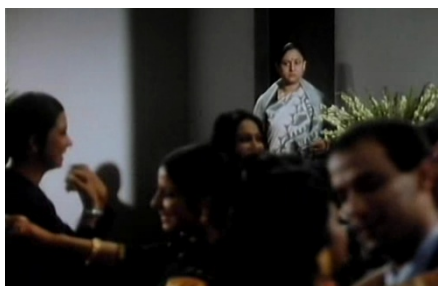


Fig 8 Psychic distance from middle class



Fig 9 Spectre of Brati

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