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Towards the scope of 'Individual Time' and 'Collective Time', and the role of subjective consciousness in its formation: A Study of Satyajit Ray's '*Kapurush O Mahapurush*' ('The Coward and The Holy Man')

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Abstract:

The idea of time, its various sensibilities of influence on the individual and community has been an idea very little speculated on in the realm of academic studies related to Indian regional films. While the biggest work on the subject is available in Gilles Deleuze's works on the subject of Cinema, curiously titled "Cinema" (in two volumes), the writer of this article, seeks to use the Deleuzian tradition of studying the subjectivity of protagonists and the temporalisations of their respective time; in terms of the narrative that they have been located in. The author seeks to likewise study one of Satyajit Ray's least discussed gems "*Kapurush O Mahapurush*" (released overseas as 'The Coward and The Holy Man', as a part of the Criterion DVD collection), through the lens of phenomenology, and tries to make sense of the dilemma of the "timeless" and the "out of time" as faced by the protagonists of the movie.

Keywords:

time, abject, Satyajit Ray, "Kapurush O Mahapurush", aura, totalisation, temporalisation, the other man

I

It was Satyajit Ray, who had in his film version of Rajshekhar Basu's "Birinchibaba", provided a very cryptic, however a very timeless aphorism, about the lack of a stipulated "present". The film shows, Birinchibaba, perform a ritual in front of his followers, where he uses his right hand to denote the future and his left hand to denote the past; while the right hand moves in a clockwise fashion, the left moves in an anticlockwise fashion; he states that there is nothing that could be absolutely defined as a present. In the entire ritual, the point of contact is between the index fingers of both the hands is defined as the 'present moment'. For analytic ease, the arrangement has been reproduced below, as a screenshot from the movie.



Now, it is said, in the movie, that history is generated, when both the hands keep on moving in the direction as specified, which in turn goes on to depict, the lack of a present moment.

This, rather interesting ritual, which finds no mention at all, in the Rajshekhar Basu short story, is something I believe that is of key value in understanding the manifold issues relating to the Heideggerian dictum that “there cannot be a Natural time, since all time belongs to the Dasein”. (Heidegger 262)

In this essay I would attempt to analyse the relationship between various notional ideas about time, through an enquiry into the Satyajit Ray film, “Kapurush O Mahapurush”, basing the thesis of the essay on the working relationship between the two stories narrated within the framework of the film.

II

“-I don't find the historian's need to ascribe responsibility a particularly fruitful arena, sir.

-Care to elaborate?

-Historians yearn for an answer to the question of who's to blame for this event or for that atrocity, but...

I don't know, sir. Sometimes it seems to me it is impossible to know.

-Go on.

-Well, Patrick Lagrange, sir, said that,

“history is the certainty produced at the point when the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.”

Sense of An Ending, Julian Barnes, The Movie Script. (Nick Payne, page not specified on website)

During the First World War, the soldiers were advised to wear their wrist watches with their dials facing inside in order to save themselves from being seen by the snipers. (Herbellin 1) This was also the time when, the wristwatches started coming with the seconds arm. I feel, that the industrial production of watches with the seconds hand was a telling blow on the Classical idea of the subordination of time to movement which could be easily considered to be a roundabout definition of the “periodic time”, which spoke of a history, and espoused a sense of “empty homogeneity”. This seconds arm, which never stops, metaphorically, or even literally in certain wrist watches, engenders the necessity of understanding the philosophy of time with respect to its experientiality to the subject, ergo this brings us to the idea of the Phenomenological notion of time, as enunciated by Heidegger and Husserl.

It is in the Phenomenological notion of time that time subordinates itself to the human consciousness and the existence or the Dasein (being-unto-death, a term which Heidegger prefers in order to refer to the ontologically authentic notion of the being). It is the diktat of the *authenticity* that the being should follow, rather than that of the Cartesian cogito that which seeks to define the existence *qua* the ability of the being to reify its selfhood by logical abstraction and thought. The Phenomenological quality of time shatters the myth of the unified selfhood and posits an idea of an experientially determined being, who is oriented towards its own demise as a mark of authenticity rather than logical thought.

Martin Heidegger's notion of the time as a “self-constituting activity” is at par with the Hermeneutics of Suspicion that grew as a part of Modernist enquiry onto the glorious unquestioned cult of the enlightenment notion of the cogito. (Ricoeur 32) Even though, most scholars of the German Phenomenological school agree to the fact that Heidegger was himself suspicious of the concept of dialectics, I think he goes the closest here towards engendering an idea of the present as an ever changing dialectic between the past experiences and an orientation towards a future, or the lack of it, which in this case is Death; and at once it is understandable why he stops short of using the term “dialectic”. The finitude of the being renders the entire process of the struggle as an act of “temporalisation” rather than a “dialectic”.

Going back to Satyajit Ray's movie “Kapurush O Mahapurush”, it is interestingly observable that the two stories almost form a “gospel-parable” relationship, with each other. “Kapurush”, which basically is an adaptation of Premendra Mitra's short story “Janaika Kapurush er Kahini” (The Story of a Coward), forms an interesting partner piece to “Mahapurush”, and vividly illustrates the chaos of an endless temporalisation of instances. Peter Osborne in his seminal lecture on “The Politics of Time”, attests to the existence of a form of ‘totalisation’, which is intrinsically related to such a form of ‘temporalisation’. He says:

“All temporalisation is a phenomenological necessity, an ongoing process of differentiated unification of three temporal ecstasies (past, present and future)

through which human existence is constituted as something ‘outside-of-itself’ and open to history”. (Osborne 6)

In “Kapurush” the protagonist, Amitabha Roy, suffers from a sense of historic temporalisation, wherein, he is invited to stay in with a Tea-estate planter who had married Amitabha’s love interest, from his days of struggle. It is necessary to note in this case that Amitabha’s desire to act and his subsequent inability to act in this story is basically, a tacitly authentic stance born out by his own guilt stemming from the past; and sustained in its place by a sense of *aporia*, which is a spectral product of the confused state where in he is unable to identify, whether or not Karuna is actually happy in her marriage to the planter.

An *aporia* that is formed out of a dialectic between a historic guilt of the character and the unsettled symbolic debt, which the love interest never claims; hence it achieves a “temporal” quality, in terms of a present that offers a very kaleidoscopic view *vis-à-vis* a deferred decision in the past, and an unstated debt in the *instant*. In order to make sense of the visceral quality of the abjection that the instance renders on the protagonist, it is necessary to be understood in relation to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the ‘*aura*’. Walter Benjamin, in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, defines the concept of aura, as something that distances the reproduced object from the domain of tradition that had produced the original. By many copies, the position of unique honour, that the original version merits, is debased. (Benjamin 230)

Just like the image makes it easier for us identify the social bases of contemporary decay of aura; I believe, it is through Karuna’s eloquent silence to Amitabha’s repeated entreaties, that the flashbacks of their courtship scene and their conflict is actually vindicated. The “present” moment of conflict that the film very much hinges on, where in Amitabha justifies his inability in the past to marry Karuna, despite her repeated entreaties, is but a perverted copy of the original, in which the protagonist is blinded by the aura of the enigmatic woman. A hasty make-believe temporalisation is achieved, both of them receive a makeshift closure, and the story if it ended there; would have fruitfully been a triumph of the radically phenomenological quality of time.

But there still remains a catch, almost a lure, one can say- the question of the historical temporalisation; while Heidegger’s account of phenomenological time calls for a temporalisation of the “historical instances” and a “reduction of the history to the ‘historicality’”. The protagonist’s tragic story in “Kapurush” is not something that we could very easily add to the register of history, but to the category of the historical (*Geschichtlichkeit*), which does not depend on the events of history but of the outcomes of such event. Kapurush could have very easily been a morality fable, that reworked the ritualistic formation of the present as formulated by Birinchibaba in ‘Mahapurush’, but it does not, and here in lies the authenticity of the *tragic* element in Kapurush, wherein, positing faith in a ‘*present present*’. (Osborne 5) in a way undoes the protagonist. The pattern of the historic rejection is aptly crystallized in the laconic

observation made by the tea-planter on the subject of bangla films, when he learns of his profession:

“Boy meets Girl. Boy Loses Girl. Boy meets Girl. Boy Loses Girl”.

Teleology *par excellence* indeed!

Perhaps, in retrospect, it is necessary for me accept that the idea of “aura” in this particular case, comes very close to Julia Kristeva’s idea of “abjection”. I would amplify this argument in the light of the following scene from the film:



The above scene, comes just after the moment of the conflict between the estranged lovers, and luridly underlines the historicity of the filmic subtext. The aura that emanates from Karuna's ring evidently dismembers all the vestiges of old memories that had been buried within the deeper chasms of his consciousness. Unlike an artwork, whose aura emanates from the fact that it is located in one time-space and is being observed or studied in another time-space, which decimates the traditional fabric of enframement of the artwork, this scene churns out visceral memories in Amitabha, and this abjection produces an aura in turn because he cannot act, on the basis of that. The historicity of his temporalisation works out as a deterrent factor, wherein as the *other man* he is culturally not expected to act on the basis of that (morality), but he has already rendered that inauthentic and of purely "historic" value, while engaging in a conflict and asking her if she is happy in her marriage.

On the subject of abjection, Kristeva says:

"The one by whom the object exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Instead of sounding himself as to his "being," he does so concerning his place: "Where am I?" instead of "Who am I?" For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never one, nor homogeneous, nor totalizable, but essentially divisible, fold-able, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the object—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray." (Kristeva 20)

Amitabha's position in the filmic narrative, more so in the short story, has been one of "historical" diachrony, sustained by the failure to elicit a potent response from Karuna, but his already totalized "present present" (Husserl) again becomes heterogenous and gives rise to older memories, which could almost be termed as a *revenant*, going by the fashion, in which Ray invokes them within the narrative. At once, the phenomenological movement of time stops dead in its tracks awaiting an anticipation of an ending of history, such that the events are totalized.

However, there is another possible angle that could be played out in this context, however that remains to be considered; even if its just there for exhausting an unstated possibility of the same. What if Karuna's ring itself a repository of history in itself? Simply put, an object that is a but a product of history but is at the same time historical for it functions as a cultural object in the presence scenario of consideration. Simply put, as a mark of marriage it dazzles Amitabha in the 'aura' of his old days of courtship, and at the same time it is a mark that virtually puts a 'rubber-stamp' on the planter and Karuna's marriage. In fact, the ring is a necessary signifier in this context, but is no more than a rubber stamp simply because throughout the movie, there is hardly any sort of romantic or any other chemistry of sort between the two, other than that of a rich government official and his trophy wife. "Among the most noteworthy characteristics

of human beings,” says Lotze, “belongs... next to so much self-seeking in individuals, the general absence of envy of each present in relation to the future.”(Quoted in Water Benjamin, Thesis on the Philosophy of History, Thesis II). Karuna betrays no emotion to her past lover, about the fact whether her conjugal life is a happy or a painful one, something that denies Amitabha, the sense of completion in terms of being able to move on. Amitabha is grossly in and out of both their histories, from the order of Karuna as a lover to the order of Karuna as a married woman. Seen in a different way, perhaps the enigma of the shining ring is not different in anyway from Karuna's own enigma, which does not let her past lover and us, the audience even a scope to speculate about her own situation and standing in life. I am almost tempted to call Karuna a Russian doll in this regard in the way, she hides and replicates her own sadness, anger, shame, desperation, nonchalance (in that order over time). Karuna and her ring furthermore perhaps be speculated to share a metaphor-metonymy relation in terms on which Asmitabha's delayed guilt gets deflected, but again that is a question of desire, which we are perhaps not exploring here again.

The totalization is not achieved, until the final scene of the film, wherein, we see Karuna returning to Amitabha, not to accompany him, but only to procure the bottle of sleeping pills that he had perfunctorily stolen from the guest room at the planter's house. It is in this act of returning the stolen bottle of sleeping pills, that the primordial debt is settled, however only in terms of similitude. He had kicked off their courtship in the past by paying for her bus ride, in their first meet, but had subsequently rejected her fervent pleas to marry her. The sleeping pills become an artefact that settles the circuitous debt to the past, albeit on a very superficial level, indeed. This is indeed “an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life of new significance”, however, I disagree with her contention that this situation is heralded by the ‘abject’ itself. I would rather, drawing from my analysis here, suggest that, it is the reorientation of the Dasein, post the abject that kicks off a *lifeworld* (used in the Husserlian sense) of authenticity; of existentialism.

III

I have always understood Mahapurush to be a morality fable in adjunct to Kapurush. It is extremely topical, and what is more significant about it is after all a comedy film, which only carries a meaning when seen in relation to Kapurush. Ray's addition of the ritual, is something I believe is a mark of sheer brilliance, owing to the fact that it forms a metatextual syntagmatic relation to the previous story, where the absence of a present moment worth acting on, is nowhere to be found.

The sense of the abject that sticks out a sore thumb within the otherwise effectively totalised conscious time in Kapurush, gathers a much-needed comedic relief in this section.

Birinchibaba, who is the artificially forged figure of the totalized being in this section, is someone I believe to be indeed in the best position to invoke the past without as much detachment as he does, as a part of his act as a fake *guru*. The instances he presents to his congregation like his argument with Plato, or his Discourses with Shiva or him training Einstein, are a part of an elaborate hoax, but somehow, his central thesis, that on the absence of a present is something I believe needs serious consideration. Putting up an act as a holy man, it is I think, authentic that he has deals with all historic and religious characters with the similar detachment. He speaks of Buddha, St. Augustine, Einstein, Jagat Seth, *Brahma*, Plato and Jesus' Crucifixion in the same breath, which I believe makes his enacted consciousness delectably secular, uniform and authentic.

A character who in anyone else's writing style would break the internal *leitmotif* owing to the absurdity of the conceptualisation, in Rajshekhar Basu's work, he becomes a much-revered Saint. He becomes the *deus ex machina for resolving the conflict in both the stories through rationalisation and his own ultimate incarceration*. The troubling element of the entire section perhaps lies in the fact as to why are his schemes not exposed at the very beginning; why does he attract a following first and then exposed?

It could be so, that, Birinchibaba's being, could have been misunderstood to have this messianic quality, who, while articulating the past historically, does not recognize the way it actually it was. This is but an act of misinterpretation, on the part, of his followers, and not his own; as far as his own historical quality is concerned, he is being perfectly authentic to his adopted past.

The final act, wherein he is exposed, is somewhat of a necessity in order to evoke a sense of historic completion; which effectively ties in within the phenomenological perception of history as well as the fact that, it engenders an "aura" owing to a violent extrication of a hitherto historically enframed character, out of his adopted narrative.

The "temporal index" which the past carries in it for redemption, according to Walter Benjamin, is in its own way very much similar like Creon's edict against Polyneices' burial in *Antigone*, it is a finite decision, just like Amitabha's youthful inability to marry Karuna (Benjamin 263). However, its unrealised *possibilities* are infinite and the outcomes become absurd, we have as a result of the edict, Haemon, *Antigone* and *Eurydice* dead, and *Creon*, insane. By comparison, Amitabha's decision, invokes somewhat of a similar situation, but since he is not a figure moving in mythic time, his acts are not "in time", thus he becomes once more reified as a historical being. The fact that Birinchibaba, espouses the spiritual kernel of Amitabha's plight in a different context, and is exposed at the end of the film; is in a way a re-establishment of our hope in a "present", and a dismissal of Amitabha's plight as a 'timeless' fiction, that haunts like a revenant; but is ineffective like a wristwatch that has stopped.

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BIO-NOTE

Rajarshi Roy is M.Phil scholar at the English department of Jadavpur University, West Bengal. He is at present working on his M.Phil thesis which deals with the idea of the uncanny in Bengali Science Fiction literature by Satyajit Ray. He is also a project fellow at the Centre for Cultural Diversity and Wellbeing, as a senior translator under the UGC R.U.S.A-2.0 program. His interests include psychoanalysis, Renaissance Art History of Low European Countries, and chess studies.

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