

To the Noon and Back

Certain seasons and time have direct associations with the books read and films watched in the growing up years. Like feeling nostalgic about autumn with the golden dry leaves under the feet is obviously something to do with hanging around the European film sections in film festivals. Similarly afternoon for me is always Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Erendira was bathing her grandmother when the afternoon wind of her misfortune began to blow...*, (Beginning of the short story, The incredible and sad tale of Innocent Erendira and her heartless grandmother). Afternoon means premonition, anticipation, slightly breathless.... and essentially waiting for...

But for all these to take place there is a technical requirement. You will have to be alone – loneliness is the texture. Somehow afternoon cannot be a scene of crowd. At the most three friends around an amateurish planchet board. But that again is a part of premonition, anticipation routine. In Bengali children's literature there are some special quality ghosts who appear only in the afternoon. *Thik dukkurbela bhute mare dhela...* (right in the mid afternoon the ghosts throw pebbles). These are not nocturnal ghosts with blood thirsty motives. Friendly ghosts out to tease you in vulnerable moments of deserted afternoons. They are to be found around the guava tree in the vast courtyard, behind the dysfunctional Kali temple, on the small hillock behind the school building and so on. Their presence could be felt mainly in the afternoons during the summer vacation. But these are about growing up in places which are in contemporary lingo called small towns. Metropolises are different.

What about our beloved Mumbai, the queen of all metropolises? Is it possible to have an afternoon in this city! Since it does not even sleep in the night, afternoon snooze is definitely out of question. Wonder how the pre-teen people of Mumbai read adult literature without the adults indulging in afternoon snooze. The forbidden passion read through the lonely afternoon in a lonelier terrace gives that very special pain in the throat that only adolescence can endure. Do the hyperactive adults of this city allow such bliss to the teenagers? How do the young cope with this loss? The reply almost precedes the query – they surf the net in all hours. Their growing up is not necessarily related to the blazing light of the afternoon. But ours was.

But without snooze, without loneliness, without crisp winter and dry summer can there be any afternoon? Afternoon is the cusp period between two animated zones of morning and evening. Can Mumbai have any time zone demarcated as dull? Is there anything else other than the local trains being slightly accessible, that makes the afternoons memorable in this city? For most of us afternoon is only a short tea break to wonder how much is left of the working day. *Life is short but Thursday afternoons are intolerably long*, Brett Whitely. No wonder that 'Good Afternoon' is

not really a part of our greeting rituals. No formal afternoon to rethink the morning and carefully lay the evening table. With the current trend of light diet leisurely lunches have also become a thing of past. The buzz word is 'brunch', another way of killing the autonomy of the poor afternoon. With no lunch, no snooze, no secrecy and no Darjeeling tea with English muffins, our Bombaiya afternoon just passes by.

As I write this I look down at the Western Express Highway through the window next to my study table. No trucker enters and leaves the city in the afternoon. It has actually something to do with the rule that heavy vehicles cannot ply in the city (which officially starts where the highway ends) during 9am to 9pm. That, in a strange way, domesticates the mighty highway. With only the Marutis and Santros, punctuated by few Qualises and Sumos the gateway to the mega metropolis looks very accessible. The Mid Day seller urchin boys and the eunuchs with claims of invisible dead body of the mother waiting for a decent funeral rule the signals – the drivers and passengers being in eye level in contemporary low sitting cars. In the dusty, muddy Bombay afternoon as you are struggling to avoid the lethal smoke coming out of the vehicle diligently standing in front of you, suddenly the eyes get covered with images of pristine beaches or colourful balloons above some surreal palm trees. No, it is not an attack of sun stroke. The sweaty vendor displaying his product with an amazing acrobatic skill. He is selling car sheds. Afternoon is their pick hour. The invisible people at the most visible spots.

But we were looking for the loneness, some sort of solitude. Incurable fortune seekers, heart broken lovers, out of job bar dancers and documentary filmmakers know where to find solitude in the heart of this over populated city. Almost like a method in madness it is to be found at the long distance platforms of VT station in the afternoon. Suddenly the revered-feared Terminus of Victoria looks like a small town affair, strewn with a few stray characters with the crows and the dogs for company. Very few long distance trains depart or arrive in the afternoon. I wonder why? Obviously it would be much easier for newcomers to negotiate the city in the afternoons than during the dreaded pick hours of mornings and evenings, leave alone the notorious nights.

Have you ever been to the railway carshed in Kandivli or Ghatkopar? The giant trains get their shower in the afternoon. Deserted trains stand still one after the other as water hoses drench them. There is something incredibly delicate and vulnerable about that sight. The life line of buzzing Mumbai being cleaned in complete obedience and in absolute quietness! Once I had to spend an afternoon in the traffic department of Western railway. It is an overpopulated cramped office above the Bombay Central station. The hassled officer-in-charge was screaming over the phone, " I can't help it. Flying Rani needs a wash today and it will take at least another two hours to dry her." Next time I rode on Flying Rani I was extremely sensitive about her hygiene.

Afternoon casts the longest shadows. The skyscrapers lay their monstrous shadows on the street, on the sea, on the face of the young girl sitting in the window seat of a double Decker bus. We may not have afternoon ghosts as they prefer spacious fields and alone people to play with. We have shadows. Long shadows of the descending aircrafts on the ground level huts at the Sahar village, shadow of the inaccessible Malabar hill settlement on the sea, shadows of the platform roofs on the railway tracks, shadows of the recently constructed flyovers on the windows of the dilapidated workers' quarters in Lower Parel. Shadows to tell us the history of development, of betrayal and achievement, and sometime of the sheer beauty. Whose shadows fall on whom, who blocks whose sunlight tell us who is taller than whom. And that is definitely an afternoon story. If only we could pause to read that story!

Shadows of old buildings on the people and their merchandise in a narrow lane in dense Chira Bazar. Unlike the mall culture the bazaars are an afternoon concept. Especially the wholesale markets with their spectacular volume of merchandise and very individualistic style of display are like beehives in the afternoon. In a city like Kolkata or Pune or even Chennai if you entered a shop in the afternoon and dared ask for any goods you are likely to be greeted by the seasoned salesman with a "what's wrong with you? Can't you see I am sleeping?" But not in the Bombay Bazaars. Crawford market is at its most animated in the afternoon. It is said that you can never see your toes during the peak hours in Crawford market. Only connoisseurs know that 3pm is the auspicious time at the Chor Bazaar. The real owners man the shops at that time and only they know about those real vintage treasures which are not to be shown to amateur customers. An economist friend once opined that the culture and economy of a country is most palpable in its open bazaars. For example the value of the merchandise and the quantity being sold apparently speak volume about the society. Wonder how we then assess Crawford market or Chor Bazar. Where the value of the goods on offer ranges between rupees ten to lakhs? An old man with his shop of four second hand electric bulbs, a box of used shaving blades and two broken screw drivers on a torn loongi is as valid a businessman, as a tout selling dreams of a life of plenty in another continent. There are also some extremely creative enterprises. In this narrow city of islands there are always bitter disputes over space. It is impossible for new entrants to secure some space to spread their meager offers. So a woman sits/stands under a large black umbrella while her goods of plastic necklaces and earrings are hung and stitched on the umbrella. These bazaars, currently only a shadow of its earlier glories, can still upset all plans of making Mumbai a regular-linear city.

Bombay Central Bridge is really a causeway between two cities. The Hira Pannas, the Crossroads, the racecourses are a distant dream when you enter Pila House, the entertainment

district. In the old theatres in Pila House the special shows of 3X films are not screened in the night shows, but in the afternoon. With ticket prices ranging between Rs.10/- to 15/- forbidden afternoon passions are alive, in another form. The language of the films range from Bhojpuri to Urdu to Spanish. No, subtitles are not required. Words are least important. Pictures speak louder, literally. But the blessing of the local *peers* whose *dargas* are generally part of the theatre establishments, is a must for the multi-lingual, multi-religious odd crowd who throng there for unadulterated afternoon fun.

The old saas-bahu sagas are re-telecast in the afternoon. Apparently the housewives prefer to watch them instead of afternoon naps. The poor housewives, a generic constituency whom everybody knows about but nobody belongs to. In the morning they are the base activities in preparation for the day's battle, in the evening they are the gracious hostess. Only in the deserted house in the afternoon they are a market, a constituency called idle housewives. Many celebrated writers who were technically housewives wrote their books, often autobiographies, in the solitude and privacy of the afternoon. It was an act of forbidden passion for them as well. But today the scope of 'female' forbidden afternoon passion is reined in the HUF (Hindu undivided family in the language of law books, created mainly to manage the family fortune and evade taxes) stories of mothers and daughters tied in-laws. Wonder what has happened to the celebrated customs of unannounced visits of the jobless yet charming brothers-in-law in the dead of the afternoons. Are they also made to watch Balaji merchandises along with their favourite sisters-in-law? Or the prince charmings of that variety are not in circulation anymore? Must admit that the Bombaiya kids on summer vacation and the foot loose afternoon men in the vicinity of Pila House are much better off than their mummies as far as afternoon entertainments are concerned.

Afternoon is a cursed word in outdoor filmmaking. The top sunlight is an absolute no-no. In shooting lingo – *It gives 'burn out'*. Ideally there are two golden time zones to shoot outdoor: early morning and early evening, popularly known as magic hours. Except ofcourse during the monsoon. In monsoon it is a whole day of magic hour. "Satya" was majorly shot in monsoon light. Otherwise grey and brown city of Mumbai becomes greenish and looks extremely mellow. Afternoons get their dues, it becomes important to register their presence. Whoever is fortunate enough to have a decent window to look through cannot resist looking out in the monsoon afternoon and wonder 'whether this Bombay is that Bombay?'

Anyway back to my occupational preoccupation. Golden rules of magic hours are for golden films shot within the studio system. Iranian filmmakers, especially Abbas Kiarostami, have made a genre of shooting under the blazing sun. Grammar is twisted. Recently 'Bunty and Publi' have arrived in Bombay under the late afternoon light. But in 'amchi Mumbai' notwithstanding the aesthetical

merit of the light, afternoons are sometimes a blessing in disguise for the independent filmmakers. Want to catch a riot of colours in this city? The parked fishing boats in the Versova beach with its multi-coloured flags flying in full glory under the afternoon sun is the sure shot. Want to dodge the custom police and shoot the cityscape from the sea? Take a ferry to the deep sea in the afternoon. Neither the fear of being caught for shooting without permission, nor the anxiety of the annoying sound of diesel run fishing boats spoiling your sound track. Shoot the beauty of the island city to your heart's content. The bonus will be the blazing ripples on the sea. Touché! Finally have found a people who snooze in the afternoon in Mumbai. The custom police and the fishermen.

PS. Have decided not to talk about the adrenaline activating lover spots in the afternoon city for the fear of awakening the overzealous moral polices. Whoever dares to love in this city automatically knows those areas and also knows that afternoon is the vantage time.

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