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Salaam Bombay!

Mira Nair's 1988 film *Salaam Bombay!* is a raw, poignant exploration of life on the streets of Mumbai. Nair's canon of work as a documentarian highly influences the film as she uses a realistic narrative, visuals, sound, dialogue, and other elements to deliver social commentary about societal structures and economic disparity in India. Instead of merely relying on trained actors' performances, the film integrates it with performances by street children and adults who were trained specifically for their roles. This choice is captivating as it pads the film with unrestrained intensity and allows for raw authenticity.

The film follows Krishna aka 'Chaipau,' an adolescent runaway trying to earn 500 Indian rupees to find a way back home. After a chance encounter with other street children, Krishna ends up under the tutelage of Chillum (Raghbir Yadav), a drug-dealer struggling with his own demons. Chillum, in turn works for Baba (Nana Patekar), a loathsome lowlife who earns his living pushing drugs and trafficking young women into prostitution. As the plot unfolds, the audience witness Krishna's trials and tribulations, his attempts at the "hero's journey," and the multitude of subplots that are equally distressing and gut-wrenching. The film examines themes such as social lopsidedness, abject poverty, patriarchy, juvenile delinquency, child labor, bonded labor, manipulation, human trafficking, among other things.

Rather than taking the overly stylized and dramatized route of Bollywood's typical narrative structure, Nair intersperses the fictional tale with uncomfortable elements of realism. The first instance of this bleakness is depicted after Krishna arrives in Mumbai (previously called Bombay) and is chased by a disheveled, menacing vagrant. This sequence works as it furthers

the plot (Krishna meets Chillum following this), and also introduces the audience to the space -- urban cacophony, precariousness, alienation, and insignificance of Krishna amidst a sea of people. Nair's choice to base Mumbai for the filming location is appropriate, as this fast-paced city just like New York or London or Paris is agnostic and indifferent to the plight of underprivileged and less fortunate. Undeterred by the film's fictional makeup, Nair channels the film as an explorational documentary while interspersing it with themes of visual anthropology/ethnography. Despite her Indian roots, Nair separates herself from this world, turning into a sociologist/anthropologist to avoid biases that may inadvertently seep in.

The visual choices present scenes from everyday life – a curious man looking out of a window, children walking to school, vendors selling food and goods, sex workers soliciting, crowds engaging in religious celebrations, commuters embarking and disembarking local trains, criminals acting with impunity, etc. These scenes are apropos of observational cinema which according to its definition, “Emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera. The filmmaker does not interact with subjects but only observes them” (Dapena). This choice gives the audience an immersive perspective; bereft of ideological, social, or political influence.

Nair's film language is replete with close-ups, medium close-ups, slow zooms, wide establishing shots, panning movements. Wide shots establish the seedy grimness of the Kamathipura slum, a place that continues to be reviled for its notoriety. Medium shots when Krishna and/or others walk towards the camera are prominent as deep focus (deliberately or otherwise) with the background emphasizing the low cost for human capital.

Krishna's expressions that alternate between hope and helplessness are striking. Krishna's interaction with Chillum in a cemetery where the two characters in a drug-filled haze

indulge in dialogue and divulge personal information is impeccably captured using slow zooms, shot/reverse shot and closeups. This works as it captures Chillum's vulnerability and Krishna's haplessness at the same time. Other scenes with the duo such as Chillum's suicide attempt even as Krishna stops him is remarkable and painful. In a scene where sex workers are putting on their makeup, Nair uses rack focus and foregrounds it with Manju and her dolls, juxtaposing innocence, and insidiousness. Transitional shots where the characters simply stare into the void or go through daily rigmarole acts as narrative ellipsis that offers a fly-on-the-wall perspective for the audience to be in the thick of things.

The editing is strung together effectively. A scene when Manju, Rekha and Krishna dance with the actor Sridevi's songs playing in the background abruptly cuts to the street kids gambling and smoking. This choice is jarring yet powerful as it delineates that momentary joys in this world are immediately replaced by harsh, unpleasant truths. Nair uses her female gaze to good effect – sex workers have agency and a loud voice (literally or otherwise). For example, Rekha repeatedly vouches for her daughter Manju's safety and demands Baba address the situation. She is a victim but a loyal lover, and fealty clouds her judgement. Rekha and Manju interact, circumstances notwithstanding, and share a powerful mother-daughter bond while dancing, talking, playing, and trying to find the proverbial silver lining. An incisive instance of Nair's female gaze is during the penultimate sequence where a disillusioned Manju finally understands the gravity and despairs of the situation- she is “tainted” because of her lineage.

Salaam Bombay! implicitly speaks volumes about the historical context and the social setting of its world. At the time (late 80's), India was still reeling from the horrible aftermath of British colonization, undergoing an economic upheaval as the economy was on the brink of bankruptcy -- India was borrowing heavily from foreign banks and was struggling to repay its dues (after 1993 the country's economic situation improved drastically). A similar theme persists in the film where Krishna, Sola Saal, Rekha, Chillum, and others are trapped without a way out, burdened by their own existence -- struggling, but surviving.

Krishna through his performance becomes the poster child for countless child laborers and victims orphaned by their families and the system. The story is centered around him and hence allows the audience for interiority into his paradoxical, muddled mind. He is wise beyond years; he has no choice. He has glimmers of hope when his employer at the tea/food stall pays him for his work -- money that he hopes to take back to his mother and brother. His character goes through immense mental tumult and despite this, he is resilient. He works in unsanitary and unsafe conditions without complaining. He is forced to stay in a juvenile home from where he escapes. He loses Chillum to addiction and realizes that all his hard-earned money was smoked away into oblivion by this "friend." His unrequited crush on Sola Saal ends in heartbreak when the couple are caught trying to engage in arson. However, the most painful payoff is in the final scene where he realizes he is back to square one, is lost and has nowhere to go. The blatant disregard for human life and the callousness of "adults exploiting children for their gains" is sadly a continuing reality for many in the global south. While the situation has vastly improved, there is a lot of room for rectification.

Salaam Bombay! Is an exceptional exegesis of the human condition in its most crude form. What begins as a simple story about a boy finding his way back home turns into a tale of hope, despair, and devastation.