Seeing is not believing: social invisibility in *Salaam Bombay*

Nilakshi Roy

Department of English, V.G. Vaze College, Mumbai University, India.

Abstract: *This paper seeks to show how film recaptures strategies of invisibilisation of children and their labour. Children's bodies, as well as their very existence, are rendered immaterial, once they are out of the pale of the family and fall out of step from society. The paper examines this with reference to Mira Nair's film Salaam Bombay (1988).*

Film studies scholars however argue that film is today a medium that is dominated by power centres, and thus the body and all other visuals are seen or not seen according to the discourses on otherness. Thus, even though the medium of film is used to make things visible, people continue to remain invisible in these domains of powerful discourse.

Conversely, there is hypervisibility of certain types of films which actually reduces their impact or again, their visibility. Mira Nair attained a lot of fame after making this film. She portrays the way these children and their problems exist unnoticed. This paper concentrates on four aspects of children's labour in the film and how such labour renders them invisible, and bases its analyses on some sequences in the film. Their lives are transitional; their identity as a labourer dwarfs any other; they are condemned to destitution without access to their finances; and the city renders them so invisible that the audience is compelled to do so. A few scenes illustrate these aspects I wish to draw attention to very well.

It appears in the film that there is a flow of people in which the children get lost. The idea of flow itself is fraught and contested, as it suggests that things happen smoothly. Is the flow of people really as smooth as a flow, does it not hide the tensions of human life and make them seem immaterial, invisible? The invisibilisation of these tensions is what this paper seeks to draw attention to.

Keywords: *Flow, hypervisibility, hypermodernity, identity, invisibility.*

I.   Introduction

"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me..... When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me." [1] (Ralph Waldo Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Prologue, 3)

This paper seeks to show how film recaptures strategies of invisibilisation of children and their labour. Children's bodies, as well as their very existence, are rendered immaterial once they are out of the pale of the family and stop belonging to a determined social class. The paper examines this with reference to Mira Nair's film *Salaam Bombay* (1988).

The relationship between cinema and human beings is extremely visual and visceral: it allows us to see bodies in different ways. Gilles Deleuze [2] has said that cinema places the body at the centre between life and speech. He argues that it is through the body alone that cinema forms its alliance with the spirit, and even with thought.

Film studies scholars however argue that film is today a medium that is dominated by power centres, and thus the body and all other visuals are seen or not seen according to the discourses on otherness. Thus, even though the medium of film is used to make things visible, people continue to remain invisible in these domains of powerful discourse.

II.   Mira Nair's Films

Conversely, there is hypervisibility of certain types of films which actually reduces their impact or again, their visibility. Mira Nair's claim to fame happened with her brand of realist filming, through *SalaamBombay*, a most acclaimed film of that genre that year, getting 25 awards and several nominations. Later, with *The Perez Family* (1995),*Vanity Fair* (2004)*, The Namesake* (2006), Mira Nair herself herself became highly visible and yet the plight of India's street children became cinematically visible again only in Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). This is only temporary, and till the latest film on street children is made, the work that Salaam Balak Trust that Nair established did or the NGOs Boyle set up will remain hidden.

However, it must be said that both in the matter or content and positioning of the film, although temporarily, Mira Nair has succeeded in making visible the plight of children on streets and their labour which actually renders them invisible.

The film itself was germinated in similar circumstances: while researching for her film *Indian Cabaret* (1984) Nair noticed alittle boy in the rooms of the girls. She wondered how he was there and never forgot him, though she never saw him again, and he inspired Chaipau, as she says in Muir [3] (2006: 36).

She focused on this aspect of his invisibility when she made the film *Salaam Bombay*, and the shot selections, montage as well the directorial nuances project this image. This paper concentrates on four aspects of children's labour and how their labour renders them invisible, and bases its analyses on some sequences in the film. Their lives are transitional; their identity as a labourer dwarfs any other; they are condemned to destitution without access to their finances; and the city renders them so invisible that the audience is compelled to do so. A few scenes illustrate these aspects I wish to draw attention to very well.

III.   Invisible Children, Lost Identities

The first is the opening sequence which establishes the nowhereness of Krishna, still not known as Chaipau, the errand boy of the circus team who gets left behind while performing his ill paid labour. He gets left behind in the strange town while he was running an errand for the boss. His body, his life and identity are totally unaccounted for, and the transitional nature of his life is thus established. In the Indian scenario, a child labourer's life is always provisional, transitional. He leaves in a train buying his ticket from a man nearly hidden from view, to go to the furthest place his money can buy. An almost invisible man, so to say, determines his future, to remain invisible in the city. The child labourer is thus in this state: flitting from place to place as he really has no place in the sun. His body can only occupy transitional spaces.

Finally landing up in Kamathipura in Bombay, he finds that he has been given a new name, surrounded with people who have similar affixes. The witty, endearing, clever little Krishna is now called Chaipau or Teaboy, as he is the boy who serves chai, tea, in Hindi and pau, or soft bread, to the brothel people, and the name is affixed usually to an utterly dispensable fellow, someone who is not counted while playing a game for serious turns.

Around him are similar types. Solasaal is a young girl who is thus nicknamed sweet sixteen as that is her chief attribute, she is a desirable teenager to be eagerly sought after among customers. No one knows her real name. Her original identity has been rendered invisible, but she is highly visible as Solasaal, the sweet sixteen of innumerable Hindi film songs.

Chillum is another "friend" of Krishna's who tragically dies on the streets. He signifies the Hash Pipe, as he deals in drugs, with which he is often found under the arches and bridges, by the railway and finally tragically dead on the streets. Another anonymous fellow comes to take his place as the drug dealers compellingly need little urchins like them, he too is, not surprisingly, called Chillum too.

The ruthless adult world not only conflates them into seamless unidentifiability, they are made into integral parts of human lust, greed and need for intoxication, all morally inappropriate arenas for little children. Food, sex and drugs, these are the indispensable needs of the underbelly of Bombay and children posing not as children but as types, fulfil these adult roles. Children's identities are thus forever lost in these 'half anaphoric' and 'half performative' names, as Francoise Král [4] calls them (2015:123). Millions of destitute children are daily inducted into these "professions" and daily rendered invisible. It is as if their real identity might disturb their bosses, thus calling them by their affixes helps render them invisible and thus usable, forever exploitable, forever dispensable.

As Král says: "their lack of social validation is not only expressed by the fact that they have no houses and sleep on the streets; they are also condemned to a lifetime of destitution by the fact that they cannot secure the financial means which would allow them to become someone else, and their lives become unimportant , unnoticed, untold, uncelebrated......." (ibid.)

In the film the child worker Chaipau finally has no access to his earnings. As it usually happens with the informal sector, he has no access to banking: he keeps his money invisible, in a crowded city, by placing it inside the cavity made by a loose brick under a bridge where they hang out. A friend of his steals the money so he will never be able to send his money to his mother, and remain forever condemned to the streets. His very invisibility renders him further invisible. The expressions of loss on his face, and the agony of his writhing body, a pain which must forever remain secret, are hidden from the public gaze though the audience is privy to it. Chaipau is now out of the pale of all social benefits, hiding out under bridges, sleeping on street corners or under staircases.

Another scene which highlights his nowhereness is the one in which Chaipau dictates a letter to be written to his mother, paying the letter- writer who throws his letter in the dustbin because he's sure it will never reach her, or that it does not matter. The lives of these children , though they are all working in some capacity to keep the city's underbelly thriving, goes into oblivion, their bodies invisible, their spirits craving our gaze. Their lives are like those unsent letters never to reach their desired destination.

IV.   Audience Responses

The audience is co-opted in this project of rendering the invisible visible, when Mira Nair's camera draws attention to them in a crowd, in a busy street or in a room where some other drama unfolds. The large crowd scene when Krishna arrives in Bombay shows him as one of the millions of the destitute crowding the streets of Bombay. Large angle shots of the boy contrast the long shots of the crowd. This puts Krishna in context, and the jump cuts both create and disturb repetition. It seems as if Krishna is just one of those who interrupt the flow of lives in the city, and will be one more lost in it, disappearing and getting absorbed into its endemic oblivion.

When Chaipau is taken to the remand home, we see what he sees through the window of the police van: iron bars, and flashing cars. It seems that in this moving city, he's in a prison from which there no getting out. It seems that nothing else matters: the rich people's cars, the speed of the city life, all images are blurred and the scene occurs in slow motion. The compression of time, either rushing or standing still, creates an aesthetics of fragmentation in the narrative of film, it's a life interrupted, in a city of flux where each motion has its internal opposite, which always crosses its path but never collides. These worlds never meet but only cause a bit of disturbance by their parallel or crossing paths. They, in other words, remain invisible to each other, the lives of the street children running their course incognito, in the flow of people.

The shadows of the iron bars fall on the passing railway tracks and the platforms, the trains and the buildings and the people waiting: it is as if the impression of mobility touches upon each of these elements and freezes them into the circuit of mobility. There is an endless sense of motion in this scene where Chaipau just resigns himself to his fate after an innocent effort at earning money. The sequence matches his flow of thought and that of people.

V.   Conclusions

The idea of flow itself is fraught and contested, as it suggests that things happen smoothly. Is the flow of people really as smooth as a flow, does it not hide the tensions of human life and make them seem immaterial, invisible? The invisibilisation of these tensions is what this paper seeks to draw attention to.

We have developed a fractal gaze: in every city, in every area, in every nation, we repeat this gaze by systematically ignoring what is unpleasant, the inner city, the poor, the pavement dweller or the destitute, and whatever little they own. Just below the skyscraper of the posh business districts in Mumbai lie the detritus of mill compounds, now replaced by restaurants, bistros and clubs. Their big boards, lights and high-tech ambience attracts the elite who slip out of their shiny cars to be ushered in through barricaded doors guarded by liveried personnel. No one even cares to keep track of the Chaipaus in this ostentatious display of the nation's aggressive hypermodernity.

References

[1]   Ralph WaldoEllison, *Invisible man*, 1952. <<http://bpi.edu/ourpages/auto/2010/5/11/36901472/Ralph%20Ellison%20%20Invisible%20Man%20v3_0.pdf>>
[2]   Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema2. The time image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. (London: Athlone, 1994)(Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1985).
[3]   John KennethMuir, *Mercy in her eyes: the films of Mira Nair.* (New York: Applause, 2006).
[4]   Francoise Král, *Social invisibility and diasporas in anglophone literature and culture: the fractal gaze.* (London: Palgrave, 2015).