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The Ustad: Domesticating the Other from With(in/out)

Abstract

With the help of a post-90 film of Keralam - a state that has acquired a literacy rate of above 95 percent and projects itself as liberal and secular by not conceding even a single seat to the Hindutva forces either in the State Legislative Assembly or the Central Parliament after its formation in 1956 - I plan to demonstrate how hegemonic ideologies of history and religion oozed into the sphere of aesthetic representation. The narrative of the film *The Ustad* oscillates between the two polarities of the Janus-faced hero. And my expectation in the following pages is to point out that this oscillation from one pole to the other of the hero's psyche and body, the juxtaposition of the seemingly real and transfixed selves, carries wider networks of social and political significations.

On June 13 1997, during his Rat Yatra at Bhopal, L. K. Advani demanded a genuine debate on the theological and ideological foundations on which the formation of Pakistan was structured. The debate was to be an attempt to resolve the enmity existing between the Hindus and Muslims of India. The debate had immense significance on present history as the unity, emotional grouping and harmonization between these two communities is as evasive as 'the black cat of Ervin Schrodinger in the dark room' which escapes the gaze of its observer. But whereas the observer does not hold a priori knowledge about the existence of the cat and has no means for her search other than the groping hands and legs, we have learned from the experiences of the other national emergence that a durable peace between various factions within a national community can be sought within a social democratic order through positive dialogical operations. In the more than fifty years since the formation of India and Pakistan on theological considerations, no productive engagement between the two communities has so far been made to resolve the tribulations. Advani's 1997 call for productive engagement is far from being an earnest cry to bring unity to these disparate spheres. In fact, it clings to the myth of the 'suspect Muslim' since his analysis draws the conclusion that the three Ds (discord, disunity and distrust) between these two communities originate in the Muslim theologians' characterization of Hindus as Kafirs.' As a remedial measure he suggested that the Muslims of India ('who have special obligation') should wipe from their mind the ideological and theological underpinnings of the two-nation

theory and also stop considering the Hindus as Kafirs as their theologians had been characterizing them (Asian Age, 14 June 1997).

With the help of a post-90 film of Keralam - a state that has acquired a literacy rate of above 95 percent and projects itself as liberal and secular by not conceding even a single seat to the Hindutva forces either in the State Legislative Assembly or the Central Parliament after its formation in 1956 - I plan to demonstrate how hegemonic ideologies of history and religion oozed into the sphere of aesthetic representation. The narrative of the film *The Ustad* oscillates between the two polarities of the Janus-faced hero. And my expectation in the following pages is to point out that this oscillation from one pole to the other of the hero's psyche and body, the juxtaposition of the seemingly real and transfixed selves, carries wider networks of social and political significations.

The film begins in "an unknown city of South India." However, as the narration progresses the protagonist, Parameswaran (Mohanlal), reveals that the unknown city of the opening sequence is Coimbatore, in Tamilnadu, South India, which is notorious for being the gravitational centre of Muslim terroristic interventions in the region. Curiously enough, it is also the epicenter of Parameswaran's underworld activities where he is unknown by his real name. The people of the city, especially the underworld, know him as the *Ustad*. People generally recognize that Ustad is the Arabic/Urdu word for Master/Teacher and carries in these languages positive as well as valued connotations. *Hans Wehr*

Written Modern Arabic Dictionary defines 'Ustad' as master, teacher or professor or as a form of address to intellectuals or grandmasters. But in the context of the film, the word retains its original meaning of Master/Teacher and sheds the entire positive significations through an utter reversal of its tone by using it to refer to the superman of the criminal world. In other words, Parameswaran is the Ustad, the Master/teacher of the criminal world and he preaches crime and teaches his pupil malevolence, immorality and sin.

The opening scene unveils a conflict between Parameswaran and his business partner, Yusuf (Rajeev), the principle antagonist of the film. In the unknown city of South India, Parameswaran demands adequate compensation for yielding his equity. But his demands are so firmly refused that he is forced to engage in a deadly battle with his rivals, resulting in his ultimate victory over them. His next step, a liberal humanist leap, places him again in an antagonistic relationship with his former friend: he helps Yusuf's half-sister marry her real lover, preventing the possible catastrophe of her getting married to an old Arab, a strategic move made by Yusuf to extend his business network to the Middle East. During the marriage ceremony, when the bridegroom is asked by Parameswaran to cast aside his unrealistic dream of marrying Sareena (Joemol), certain Muslim luminaries interfere. Referring to his Hindu origin, one of them lets him know that a 'kafar' has no business in a Muslim marriage ceremony. Parameswaran, the creature from outer space as far as the luminaries are concerned, mocks the atrocious

pronunciation of the word 'kafir' and the luminary's ignorance of the meaning of the word and proceeds to inform him the word refers to someone who denied truth even after realizing it. The word boomerangs to devour the initial dispatcher: the luminary has become the 'kafar' as it was he who denied the truth pertaining to Sareena's love and the monetary aspect of the proposed marriage. Moreover, the same 'kafar' teaches the Muslim luminary, who has just questioned the aptness of Parameswaran's presence in a space silently forbidden to him, how to call 'Allah' with the right kind of intensity by hitting on his face and making him scream the name of God.

What is the underlying message to be decoded in the construction of kafar's kafir? A severe critical posture will inform us that the letter to be deciphered here is one of ignorance, an unawareness of the kafar's kafir of her/his own World - the history, language, culture and religious essence. In addition, polygamy, the system of marriage of which the Muslims are accused by the liberal humanists in general and the right extreme ideologues of Hindutva in particular of being the chief practitioners in the world, is subtly hinted at. The liberal humanist gaze of Parameswaran subsumes every available space on the scene. From the liberal humanist stance, the victimization of woman, the status of woman as an object of monetary benefit and sexual gratification, the depriving of subjective dimension of woman, the crafting of a 'thing' out of woman etc., in essence the heavy patriarchal orientation of the Muslim system of marriage is assaulted.

But the most pathological element in the scene mentioned above articulates the Advanian Fascist rhetoric concerning the formation of two-nation theory as a direct consequence of Muslim theologians' characterization of Hindu as Kafir. Put plainly, the structure of prophet's religion contains the social-ideological machinery for developing communal strives with its other. The ideologues and acolytes of Hindutva maintain the idea that in the national framework of India Hindu has been the social and cultural other of the Muslim since the first invasion of the Muslim rulers from outside. In addition, the passionate involvement of the Muslim with the prophet's commandment regarding the destruction of the other has supplied the vital political fuel for the emergence of communal strives in India. The film designates that the solid effort by the Hindu to establish a lasting friendship with his brethren from the Muslim community through his liberal humanist intervention has become as pointless as that of painting on the surface of an ice cube. Nowhere on the earth could these opposite numbers pursue a peaceful survival so long as the Muslims remain reluctant to throw away the ideological substance of their religious system. What is fore grounded in the liberal humanist intervention of the kafar is the altruism characteristic of the other which is absent in the mindset of the Muslim: the kafar, the alien, the other, is accommodative, ready to sacrifice and tolerant.

In addition to the othering procedure in the initial scenes, the film goes on to project the body of the protagonist as contested terrain where the self and the other engage in perpetual war. The other face of the Janus-faced hero is located in

a city infamous for Muslim terroristic activities and he carries out the antithetical activities of the self as a Muslim. But for his younger sister, Pappa (Divya Unni), in his hometown in Kerala, he is the living incarnation of all the virtue that a typical Valluvanadan.¹ girl dreams of in a man. The parentless child finds in her sibling an affectionate father, a caring brother who has devoted himself completely to her, and a warm-hearted friend to whom she could confess even the most intimate details of her private world. Being the immaculate man that he is - even his apparels radiate the purity of untainted white - Pappa envisages him to be the best match for her genuine friend, Shama (Indraja). To sum up, the splitting of the body into two irreconcilable opposites replicates the ideology in circulation: the two phases of the same individual carrying the markers of two religions bear the negativity at one extreme realized in the brute insensitivity of the Ustad and its opposites are thickly concentrated at the other, symbolized by Parameswaran's ordinary roots in the hegemonic class of the Hindu social order. The initial appearance of the Ustad before our active gaze as an insensitive brute does not prevent us from noticing the fact that his original articulation is in Hindi. In fact, his criminality has been emphasized by his self-introduction in Hindi as "*Mein hum Ustad.*" The sentence carries the same meaning in Urdu as that of Hindi and its English rendering is 'I am the Ustad.' The splitting of the body as self and other, the tension between the tranquility of the Valluvanadan village and the turmoil of the city, is extended to the very fabric of language in which the official language of Pakistan plays a

strategic function. The initial utterance of the protagonist in Hindi/Urdu emphatically asserts the uncanny and the monstrous nature of the other. One would be tempted to associate his brutality with the very language he articulated as if he picked up the language and monstrosity from the same ambience, from a landscape alien to someone born and brought up in Palakkadu. An interesting reading that could be put forward is that the tension operating here is the contradictions and conflicts within the national community in which a Malayalam movie marks its other in Hindi and its social milieu. But our thesis views this from a different perspective and associates the auto-reference in Hindi with the Hindutva ideological construct, especially with the notion of the 'Muslim Other.' Our folk wisdom always tends to associate the word 'Ustad' with someone from the Muslim society who has achieved monumental stature in his existential endeavor, who embraces a subjectivity that commands our respect and adoration. An exemplary case of this minor thesis will be the titles given to the great Hindustani musicians hailing from the Muslim community like Bismilla Khan, Amjat Ali Khan, Alla Raha, Zakir Hussain, etc. The unconscious process of finding the signification of the term 'Ustad' in the collective body of the Muslim, or at least in the minority elites of the community, tempts us to assume that the subject of the enunciation of *Mein hum Ustad* hails from a Muslim world.

The Odyssey of Parameswaran could be deciphered from this perspective as a perpetual struggle between the good and the evil realized in his true and

assumed selves, between the upper caste Hindu's earnest desire to shed his assumed identity and the eternal charm offered by the uncanny. This point is sharply featured in a scene in which after a solo performance on tabla by Parameswaran, when his naïve sister wonders 'wah Ustad,' a gesture taking us to the magisterial presence of Ustad Zakir Hussain and his maestro concert, he makes an abrupt expression of shock. This is because for a moment he remains unaware of the fact that the signification of the gesture does not lie in the dark interiors of the Coimbatore city fabric where he is known by the name 'the Ustad.' The symptomatic expression of his face is indicative of the volcanic eruptions in his mind that makes desperate attempts to exorcise the evils from the body and to bury down its *deeds in the other world*.

In the climatic scene, he becomes successful in burying his *deeds in the other world* (Coimbatore city) in *Big Br/Other World* (The Middle East). Entering into the heartland of the Muslim communal life (an overt ideological gesture that resists intensification), he butchers Yusuf and thus puts a full stop into a two lives of crude insensitivity, that of the enemies from with(in/out). At one stroke he overcomes the Scylla of the external other and the Charybdis of internal other, which is a point of convergence between the spaces inside the movie theatre and outside, between aesthetic representation and political rhetoric. For the establishment of sovereign national community, nowadays we hear everywhere, what is needed is the comprehensive taming of the external other (a foreign nation),

of his/her uncanny and monstrous spirit (global conspiracy) and the internal other, the differing multiplicities operating from within the body of the self and nation (the unconscious, the ethnic or religious minorities, the woman, the Dalits, etc). That exactly is the reason why the Hindu reformist from Bengal, Vivekananda, asserted one century ago the need for cultivating steel muscles and self-discipline. No wonder the Hindutva ideologue still gives supreme importance to discipline (do not pursue the commands of your desire) and physical fitness (steel muscles are needed to overthrow the enemy).

In the national context of India, the histories of the course of taming the external other or the colonization of the outer space by the ruling class have been explained by a questionable term, Sanskritization, from which the thesis differs very much in spirit and substance and instead prefers to replace the monolithic view of one dimensionality with a more tangible and dynamic vision. It does not mean that in the technicalities of colonization of the subaltern spaces the importation of the cultural patterns of the so called Aryan race is not involved, but what is amiss in the foregrounding and celebration of such a view is the absence of a reverse 'force-field.' The course of colonization from pre-Vedic period to the present has testified the fact that the subordination and its mechanics have always faced stern resistance from the margins. The possibility of the eruption of counter violence to the colonial violence (the invisible violence which is the constitutional element of coloniality) can effectively be checked by integrating subtly the tendencies and

interests of the marginal creatures into the ruling class culture or by applying direct forms of oppression from war to policing

With this step, we position ourselves in a less vulnerable field of observation from where a penetrating gaze into the puzzling presence of Parameswaran as the agent of the taming of the other can be made. People generally remember that the catalyst in the process of taming the other was Lord Vishnu, whose various incarnations during the times in which subaltern societies gathered momentum in their counter hegemonic raids accelerated the biological expansion of Aryavarta. The modern Hindutva ritual of finding the parallels between path-breaking scientific insights and Hindu mythology distorts the image of Vishnu as a destructor of other and finds the incarnations as a mythic document of the theory of evolution. Like maintaining gymnasts on the parallel bars of science and Hindu mythology, the incarnations chart the history of the evolution of life from the initial protoplasmic movements in the water to the cultured movements of the human being in the well- developed city. The first incarnation, the fish, stands for the primordial life in water. The second one, the tortoise, signifies the migratory moment of life from water to land and the third one, the pig, represents the next phase of life, which is purely terrestrial. From there onwards the incarnations tell the stories of semi-human (Narasimha), the primitive (Vamana), the nomadic (Parasu Ram), the settler (Ram) and the city dweller (Krishna). But a much more fruitful hermeneutical exercise will be to make a methodological inquiry into the

true spirit (in the oriental sense) of the incarnation, and the insight derived from it is obvious: the spirit is identical in all the cases and what it tries to achieve is to overcome the obsessive 'return of the repressed,' the non-identical spirit. Rather than imitating the theory of evolution in advance, the mythical incarnations document the history of civilization which, as Walter Benjamin provocatively maintains, is also the history of barbarity. Better still, what is documented here is the underside of civilization, the subterranean course of history that systematically excluded and silenced the other.

But in the Ustad the demolition of otherness is achieved through Parameswaran, a name that takes us to Mount Kailash and brings the figure of its legendary hunter, Lord Shiva, one of the few non-Aryan deities celebrated by the hymns originated in Aryavarta. Kancha Illiah has demonstrated the snare hidden behind the celebration of the seemingly non-identical spirit. He observes that the way in which Brahminical hegemony had been extended all over the sub-continent was by forcing the marginalized to embrace the systemic view of karma. Still there remained certain social groups in the fringes that resisted the forced adherence to the dominant culture. In order to silence their guerilla raids on the discursive apparatus, which radiates the message of karma, Lord Shiva was created. His form and action engage in contradictory game. His external form resembles the non-identical spirit, the chthonic god of the subaltern, but in the field of action he perpetuates the word of the identical and accepts Brahminical hegemony. In other

words, Lord Shiva had been the ideological machine, the camouflaged body which hides the reverse, instrumental in enforcing the world view perpetuated by the theory of Karma in the remaining resistive groups (Ilaiah 1996).

In the post-Mandal era, when various communal lives start to revolt against the prevalent discursive apparatus and its Brahminical orientation, the Hindutva forces are alert in radiating the message of 'pan-Hinduism.' And this message is capable of blurring the vision of the 'little others,' those differential multiplicities that proclaim their self-assertiveness as a protest against the hierarchal structure of Hinduism in the form of casteism. This blurred vision of the differential multiplicities assist the construction of the big other in the psyche and body of the Muslim and bring out the notion of pan-Hinduism that negates the difference between Hinduism and the social-theological know-how of its historical victims, the non-Brahmins. It emphasizes that the former others of Hinduism, especially the Dalits, are no more alien to be tamed with a novel incarnation of Lord Vishnu, but the real others are the 'suspect Muslim' and the 'Christian missionaries' engaged in religious conversion: either the Muslims and Christians should Indianize their respective religious systems or accept the status of 'secondary citizens'. Golwalkar maintained a prototypical form of the discourse:

"The foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu

nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment - not even citizen's rights. There is, at least should be, no course for them to adopt. We are an old nation; let us deal, as old nations ought to and do deal, with the foreign races, who have chosen to live in our country" (quoted in Louise 2000: 39-40).

The telos to which Hindutva forces aspire cannot be materialized without nullifying the contradictions and collusions of their discursive system and the non-Muslim and non-Christian discursive systems of India. This corresponds to what Adorno, while dealing with Freudian theory and Fascism, succinctly has observed in relation to the political gestures involved in the seemingly anarchical actions of the Fascist horde: "They emphasize their being different from the outsider but play down such differences within their own group and tend to level out distinctive qualities among themselves with the exception of the hierarchical one" (Adorno 2001:146). In India, from time immemorial, the hierarchical differences have been set in place through the 'hereditary division of labor,' which has been the core of casteism. And in the highly charged political ambience that followed the tabling of the report of Mandal commission in the parliament, the hitherto marginalized groups of non-Aryan heredity refused to be the victims of social democratic rituals that did not bring about any radical alterations to a system that expands to more than thousand years. To push this politics of voicing into the abyss the Hindutva

ideologues reinforced the notion of the 'Muslim other' through the demolition of Babri Masjid and eventually they resolved the immanent threat from the marginal world to their power position by discarding its anti-upper-caste overtones and creating a monolithic view of history.

Like the Lord of Destruction of the mythology the hero of the film gesticulates hidden contradictions. His autobiographical briefing amply testifies the victimization of the little Parameswaran, his sister and mother at the inhuman clutches of patriarchal Hinduism. He was born in the outer reaches of a monumental building situated in Shivapuram (literally, the word stands for the land of Shiva), a small village in Palakkadu, where patriarchal Hinduism held its sway and was forced out of the village together with his mother and sister when he was still a boy. His narrative articulates loudly the fact that the feudal structure of the society played a significant role in throwing out the unwanted elements of the society. It is not surprising that this building that is reminiscent of the feudal grandeur is the only property he owns for himself, while he reserves all other valuable assets for his sister.

He has become an outcaste thanks to the moral and legal economy of the residual structure of a feudal world dominated by Hinduism. Yet, like the Lord himself, he succumbs to its excitements and actively reproduces its power relations in realpolitik and fantasy. In realpolitik, as has been demonstrated, he wages quixotic battles against an outcast like him and also reduces woman to the level of

an object whose desire and pleasure are to be reined. At the level of fantasy, the nostalgia for a time lost in the real time is tempting and substituted by his physical possession of the ultimate signified of the feudal world. As an act of revenge against the expulsion from the village by its master, he seizes the same monumental edifice onto which he was allowed to cast his eyes from the outer reaches with awe and wonder; the childhood phantasmic projection (the site of unrestrained power and coziness of familial life) that created the emotions finds a facsimile in the real possession. And as the master of the site of unrestrained power, like Ulysses, he manages to keep away the outcasts and aliens with his *upright servants*.

Having made a liberal humanist intervention into the marriage ceremony of Sareena, Parameswaran has underscored the patriarchal substance of the Muslim communal life which was in a sense the starting point of the accelerated odium between the kafir and kafar. The passive other, the victim of active other, as has been proved by the modern warmongers' rhetoric, is a fine object to extend one's liberal humanist helping hand. The liberal humanist leap, the tranquil interference, for the betterment of the existential, social and political situation of the small fry brings him into direct contact with the real other and portrays him in his true color (the patriarchal decision of the half-brother and the fanatical and intolerant attitudes of the Muslim luminaries). To quote the Slovenian superstar of Lacanian-Marxist theory: "the moment we encounter an actual/active other, there is always something

with which to reproach him: being patriarchal, fanatical, intolerant...." (Zizek 1994:215).

Are liberals (or as in India, 'free intellectuals') non-patriarchs, non-fanatical and accommodative? Parameswaran creates certain laboratory situations from where we can peel off the layers of liberal projections to reveal its own body as non-patriarch, non-fanatical and accommodative. When he comes to know about his sister's love affair, he goes wild with paroxysm of rage, accusing the westernized values of individualism and liberty. The point not to be missed is that it was this same individual who in the initial scene respected Sareena's individual choice and helped her marry her genuine lover. The modern reading of liberal principles as a cloak for concealing the imperial motives is the crucial cue for unlocking the politics of double standard. But unlike Sareena's half-brother, his patriarchal pressures are soothing experiences for the victims, the women (the hyper tech war on Iraq is also based on this soothing rhetoric of liberal politics, liberating the passive other who are suffering at the hands of a brutal and murderous other). To quote Zizek again: "the true object of anxiety is the other no longer prepared to play the role of victim - such an other is promptly denounced as a 'terrorists', a 'fundamentalist', and so on" (Zizek 1994:215).

Before proceeding to the concluding point, a qualification needs to be set in place; namely, the presence of a figure whose bodily signifiers correspond to an other, but whose self is seen as having escaped the confinements of monstrosity: a

theoretical vertigo that inverts my entire proposition to a considerable amount. Aliyappu (Augustine) is the friend and faithful supporter of the final destructor. From a larger perspective, this Muslim is an intruder into a forbidden space, a space the intervention to which should have been characterized as guerrilla raids. What, then, is the strategic function of Aliyappu as the supporter of Parameswaran's deeds, vicious as well as virtuous, in case the theoretical framework still remains unrejected? We have already noticed in the inflammatory piece the status of secondary citizen given to the non-Indianized Muslims and Christians. His secondary status in the relation enables him to establish a lasting and true friendship with the Brahmanized Hindu. Unlike Yusuf, he is not interested in asserting his difference and individuality from Parameswaran. At bottom what is condemned is the aggressiveness of Yusuf, his selfishness and disregard for the sibling, together with his violent raids into a space forbidden to him. To put it bluntly, if Yusuf be a sheep and lets Parameswaran play the role of the shepherd as Aliyappu does, then, the strife will melt into nothingness.

Why is the climatic scene set in Sharjah? Why does Yusuf go to Sharjah instead of some other places on the globe, say San Francisco or Sydney? Parameswaran seems to know the logic behind the escape: it is in the very nature of (Muslim) anti-national criminals to flee to Middle East from the enchanter of the legal system, as the *sheikhs* from this region provide them with the best protective shield in the world. One may be tempted to seek the significance of the letters

uttered by Parameswaran in another figure as if the realpolitik and representational apparatus are incapable of focusing upon the object as such. The verbal abuse of Parameswaran grows in weight as to comprise another figure from realpolitik, that of Dawood Ibrahim, who is found in similar situations as the centripetal force of a network of illegitimate activities throughout the nation and whose niche is in Dubai. Here Yusuf takes up a political function through both axes, the synagmatic and the paradigmatic, as metaphor and metonymy. That is why Parameswaran's brutal onslaught upon Yusuf assumes a symbolic configuration reminding us of Sir James Frazer's thesis on homeopathic magic prevalent in various ancient societies: "perhaps the most familiar application of the principle that the like produces like is the attempt which has been made by many people in many ages to injure or destroy an enemy by injuring or destroying an image of him, in the belief that just as the image suffers so does the man, and that when it perishes he must die" (Frazer 1993: 12-13). The huge success of the movie gestures that ancient is not the anti-thesis of the modern and that the fantasy matrix of the political unconscious still gives ample room for the modern man to fantasize what has already been fantasized for a million years altogether. Parameswaran sums up in an undemocratic manner the liberal humanist allegation of the grand design of the Islamic nations for the conversion of the entire world into their religious belief and the subsequent unleashing of violence through the pan-Islamic friendship. Parameswaran documents the barbarity of the alter ego and through the construction of dichotomy points at the sublimity of the

ego. What is amiss in this hidden narrative of ego's sublimity is Benjamin-esque poetry, couched in prose, turned into precise prose at the hands of one of the leading Marxist theoreticians writing today as "the underside of culture, is blood, torture, death, and terror" (Jameson 1991: 05). But the film gestures its solidarity with the Messianic Marxist and the postmodern Marxist. In other words, Parameswaran's life captures what his narrative misses.

1. In Malayalam films Valluvandu remains as the 'privileged object of desire.' This little village in Malabar through the aesthetic signs of the films has become the constitutional point of an imagined community devoid of differences: the signals are obvious here; the world order is quasi-feudal and patriarchal, language is Sanskritized version of Malayalam and culture is anti-western and anti-subaltern. This imagined landscape often radiates the vision of a cultured Malayali innocence and contrasts with the evil of the city (western) and the barbarity of the subaltern.

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