

A Real Feminist or Pretending to be: A Representation of Shoojit Sarkar's Piku

Abstract

My paper will be an analytical study of the father daughter relationship between Piku and Bhaskar in the movie and an attempt will also be made to justify the feminist tag attached to it ever since its inception. The basic flaw of the movie is its attempt to "do" feminism, which makes it self-defeating and sometimes turns on its allies. In a world where gender relations are lop-sided and women are at the receiving end of abuse and discrimination, each insincere and cunning appropriations of feminism causes damage, exactly the strategy adopted by Bhaskor Banerjee. Through this father daughter relation, "Piku" raises issues about those Bhaskor who use feminism to manipulate women rather than liberate them. One step at a time, our subjectivities would guide the world where there would be no frauds, socio-political or sexual in the name of feminism and Piku's are no longer deceived by Bhaskor.

Keywords: Sexual, Financial, Emotional Independence, Feminism, Marriage, Insecurity, Parent.

Introduction

"Marriage without a purpose is low IQ"

This much adored dialogue from Shoojit Sarkar's "Piku", quoted both in and out of context have led many film critics to unanimously agree on the fact that Piku is a celebration of a woman, the only girl child of a widowed father, complete with her sexual, financial and emotional independence. Indeed, most women, financially independent and capable of taking their life's decisions themselves, if asked about the cause of women's universal position of being the "other" to man, across generations, are most likely to lay the entire blame on patriarchy and the shackles it brings to women's lives. Any attempt research the problem right up to its roots leads us to the inevitable answer –the magic word, feminism.

Objectives

To study the relation between a widowed father and his young daughter and the insecurities associated with an aged parent when the child tries to turn her attention from the father to other (Electra complex)

But before the "feminist" tag is attached to the movie, an important question that needs to be addressed is that is Piku as fiercely independent as she is made out to be, because after all Piku represents a particular class-- the upper middle class. Piku is not an ordinary woman, rather she is privileged and hence can afford to indulge in feminist eccentricities. She is introduced to us as a young independent architect, running her own business and living in the posh locality of Chittaranjan Park, South Delhi. She belongs to a class where flights and taxis are the regular means of communication and dates take place in Mainland China and hence, being fiercely independent is not very difficult for her. Had Piku struggle without the cushion of wealth and privileges, hers could have been an entirely different story, the story of many middle class and lower middle class women in Delhi,. Even the fact that Piku is able to manage her home and business effortlessly doesn't seem to carry much weight, because with a full-time man-servant Budhan at the beck and call of her father and with a house-maid (one who, of course, leaves during the course of the movie), there isn't much left for her really to manage.

But even if we do not delve into such intricate aspects of the movie and take it at face value, a critical viewer cannot miss the performative aspect of feminism that is so very conspicuous in the movie. The movie centres around a seventy-year old widower Bhaskor Banerjee, proud of his late wife and daughter Piku, fussing over his constipation, questioning the institution of marriage and lamenting the career opportunities missed by his sister-in-law, his brother's wife Moni Banerjee. Such a man could have been an ideal man, a dream parent for any feminist

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daughter, save that he is a patriarch in the guise of a feminist. Piku's father Bhaskor is essentially a selfish man and feminism is simply his hobby, serving to attract attention and pass his time, much like his bowel movements, a mask for his self-centred needs. Piku's father is a worried old man, though mostly worried about his non-existing and "imaginary" ailments. He wants to be showered with attention and care and at the heart of his agenda, besides constipation, is his desire not to let go of a caregiver daughter. Piku is a free woman in all sense of the term, except of course if she wants to marry. The question here is not of the desirability of marriage in Piku's or any other woman's life, as Bhaskor Banerjee erringly makes it out to be, rather of choice, or the right to choose. By controlling her horizon at all times and in all aspects, and somewhat forcibly suppressing her voice by ridiculing her craving for a permanent commitment, he makes his championing the cause for female sexual liberation hollow. The words of Piku "*Shadi to karwao ge nehi aap meri, kam se kam in churio se hi khush hone do.*" (You will never let me marry, at least let me be happy with these bangles)¹ clearly show an internal and latent desire in the girl for a married life, but her father, due to his own selfish needs proves insensitive to his daughter's wish. At the end of the movie, when it becomes apparent that Piku and Rana were developing a liking towards each other and Piku suggests to Rana that he could stay for a couple of days more, Bhaskor is immediately indignant "*Why? Uska udhar business hain family hain. No no no, you must go.*" (Why? He has his business and family there, no no no, 1 My translation of all quotes from the original Hindi movie you must go.) According to him, why does Piku need to marry when he has permitted her to have all the sex in the world she wishes; erroneously equating marriage to a mere sexual commitment. His advice to Piku is that her relationships with men are all right, as long as they are "casual" and do not shift her attention from him and his constipation. His desire is that the only man to whom Piku should have a permanent commitment is he himself and it is his attention seeking nature that causes him to interrupt her business meetings with her clients with messages like "*Day before semi-liquid motion followed by three days of gas and constipation, what should I do?*" or her dates with potential suitors with reports that his "*potty was hard, but later became like mango pulp*". He is either suffering from constipation or his bowels are either semi liquid or thick or green or yellowish green, sometimes with and at other times without mucus and he must give all these minute details to his daughter then and there, no matter where she was at that point of time. No wonder Piku cannot have a proper relationship as most of her dates are brought to an abrupt halt due to her father's bowel related emergencies. All she has is a business partner and friend (with benefits) Sayeed Afroza and terms even that casual sexual relationship that she has with him as a "need" and "not a permanent solution"

Understandably, Piku is irritated and frustrated with her father's hypochondria and

garrulousness, his over demanding tantrums, his obsessive compulsive disorders, and his loathing for everything that the society considers 'normal'. This makes her a harder person, and more often than not, rude and emotionless. She feels she desperately needs a break but can't take one because her father is too demanding and cannot spare her. It's a monotonous routine that she cannot get she cannot get out of "Is this how I am going to live my life, discussing your shit?" she worries.

Piku, irritation is justified when her father shares with a potential suitor that she is not a "virgin" and that she is financially and "sexually independent". The scene emphasises Bhaskor's overpossessiveness, selfishness, need not only to keep but also to use his only child for himself ---an aging father's insecurity manifesting itself in a socially awkward situation. But the question that this scene inevitably raises, as Nishi Gautam points out in her article, "*How Piku's father uses sexual independence against her*" is that is this scene also not an instance of slut-shaming. Bhaskor has probably realised that sexual independence is that one "flaw", which, once disclosed, would ward off any suitor and therefore his chance of losing his daughter. As Piku herself proclaims at the end of the movie—"Has he ever thought of what I want? Absolutely selfish. Yes I have had physical relationships, but is this what he needs to tell every man I meet? 'Meet my daughter, she is not a virgin'. Which father does this?"

What highlights Bhaskor's sexism further is his attitude towards his late wife's sister, Piku's Chobi Mashi, who has married thrice and who believes in leading her life according to her own choice. Sexual independence is acceptable to him only till it keeps his daughter's mind off marriage. He does not want her to take after his sister-in-law Chobi and considering her to be a bad influence on Piku, makes his displeasure at the latter's frequent visits no secret. His insecurity does not allow Piku to take after Chobi as some guiding force for her better settled and married life. His strict instructions to Chobi are, "*Piku ke dimag mein tum shadi shadi mat bharo*" (Don't you put marriage related things in Piku's head), probably because her continuous advice to Piku is "*Find a right man and get married*" and it is she who introduces Piku to potential suitors, in a hope to arrange her marriage. Yet this should not be less with any love for his daughter and more with maintaining a manager in his house, who would look into the availability of water in his flush, his fever, his semi-liquid bowels, his constipation and the batteries of his hearing aids. As he clearly tells her—"You have to look after me. If you get married, you will have to look after your in-laws. I gave birth to you. I did not leave you and go. Now I am your child. You do the same." Such selfish desires he hides behind big words such as "*Whole life she [Piku's mother] only wanted to please me, that was her only purpose. She had no aim for herself. I wanted her to be independent. But no. She surrendered herself to my service.*" or "*Marriage is not bad, but there should be a purpose behind it. A husband only wants that wife should serve food*"

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during the day and sex during the night, but is a woman made only for this? No!", dialogues enough to rock any feminist forum but hollow internally. There is no denying that Bhaskor preaches radically feminist stuff, but the problem is that he practises something else in life, especially taking into account the fact that his own wife had been a school teacher before her marriage, but had given up her job to indulge his idiosyncrasies. Piku's love for her father, on the other hand, is much more selfless. She genuinely wants to take care of Bhaskor and knowingly puts all other aspects of her life on a backburner for him, but Bhaskor remains unsatisfied. He tells her "You always think that I am a burden on you. But I am not a burden. I can do every thing independently." Though Piku had never had the heart to stand up to her father, Rana does—"If you had been a burden on her [Piku], you would have been in Delhi. She wouldn't have taken you to Kolkata. What fun do parents derive from such emotional blackmailing?" He could not have been more right in his assessment of the character of Bhaskor Banerjee than when he tells Piku "I hope you realise that he is a selfish man."

But what proves really amazing is the nurturing care with which Piku handles treatment of the childlike idiosyncrasies of her old parent and is almost unprecedented in Bollywood, and the earnestness with which Piku understands and takes on her father's hypochondria is heart warming. She tells Rana "...kyu ki Rana ek age ke bad parents apne aap mein zinda nehi reh sakte, unko rakhna parta hain, aur wo responsibility baccho ka hi hain" (...because after an age, Rana, parents can no longer keep themselves alive, they have to be kept alive, and that responsibility lies with the children). Her father to her is like her child and her firm insistence is that if anybody is to marry her he has to "adopt" her seventy-year old son. She knows that her father's sight as well as hearing capacities have become weak, and leaving him uncared for to pursue her own life on her own terms is never a viable option for her. She refutes all allegations of her father being self-centred and attention seeking with the single but clear statement—"Even if he is, he is my father." This stark contrast between the inherent natures of the father and daughter strikes Rana Chowdhury as well, causing him to ask Piku "Tum sach mein in hi ki beti ho?" ("Are you really his daughter?")

Another remarkable aspect of the film is its motif of journey, which recurs at numerous layers. On the superficial layer, of course, the father and daughter under take a long journey by road from Delhi to their ancestral house in Kolkata. This journey, which spans over a span of roughly 48 hours, is an important part of the plot of *Piku*. During the journey, Bhaskor and Piku start singing a Bengali song *Ei poth jodi na shesh hoy* from the Bengali film *Saptapadi*. The song was picturized on Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar and is a conversation between two lovers where they discuss as to what would happen if this journey that they are on never ends and they continue to travel forever in this way. The motif of journey that recurs can be compared to Browning's

"The Last Ride Together". The actors are on a motorbike and on a journey like the characters in *Piku*. Moreover, it is interesting to note that while travelling, Piku is wearing a blue sweatshirt that has 'The Journey' written over it. There is also a song in the film that is actually called the Journey song. *Piku* is in many ways the journey of travelling back to discover own roots to finally get a proper sense of conclusion to life. Bhaskor travelled back to his place of birth Chapkakanj, which was always in his heart. Although not explicitly shown in the film, it is interesting to note that after a sequence in the film which shows Bhaskor collapsing after getting drunk at Chobi's anniversary, the first words that escape his mouth even before fully regaining consciousness is "Kolkata jabo" ("Take me to Kolkata"). It is during the journey and as a result of the journey that many new bonds are formed. Bhaskor's journey ended by letting go and then in death. This theme of journey is comparable to the journey of the food from the plate to the mouth to the time it is thrown out of the body after passing through the extremely complex labyrinth of the small and the large intestine as Rana explains. It probably explains why all food items, from khichudi, to mutton curry, ice-cream and even the Jharna ghee, are shown in extremely close shots. The constipation is a metaphor for something that has not yet completed its journey and hence, cannot yet come out. Bhaskor had to learn to let go of Piku and only then will his insecurity about her be solved. The relief of the "best motion" he had in life was again referring that he had learnt to let go, and then, death came to him quietly and peacefully that left a smile on his face. *Piku* is, thus, the journey of the final stages of a man.

Conclusion

There is something so amazing about the character of Rana Chaudhury, the owner of Himachal Taxi stand, and Irfan Khan has portrayed the character par excellenc. Rana is a civil engineer who had had been taken to Saudi Arabia with the promise of a job worthy of an engineer, but instead he found that he had been trapped and had been put in security management, with his passport taken away from him. When he could finally escape, he came back to help his father to run his taxi business. Rana is an outsider to the story, and like his profession of construction, he constructs bridges between the characters in the story. For instance, when the water pump does not start, Rana is the one who 'fixes' it. And, when he is about to leave after the pump starts working, it is he who tells Bhaskor that his problem is that no one understands him, and that he should stop hiding the salt. In other words, acceptability in society does not drop like a drop of rain from heaven, rather one has to attain it to hard work and there was no point in Bhaskor attempting to behave like an alien with his little tricks. He used to try to hide the salt because he did not want anyone in his house to get high pressure. Even though he is perfectly fine, he lived in a constant fear of getting sick. The salt is a symbol of the "tasteless" and "bland" life he had been leading. Like Rana understands the functioning of the pump, he

gives a much needed perspective to Bhaskor to help fix his problem. That is why, after Rana's advice, he takes his cycle and eats the most delicious food from the streets in Kolkata. And, when he comes back, Piku says that because of him, they ate 'kadu', 'karela', and now, all of a sudden, he wants to make them eat 'jalebi'. He had the best shit of his life when he added a bit of salt in his life. Rana also helps Piku understand the importance of one's roots and it is due to his advice that Piku too, at the end of the movie puts her foot down and refuses to sell the house she had once termed as "*jonjal*", the Bengali equivalent for rubbish. Sometimes, we need an outsider to help us provide a perspective and Rana plays that role. It is in this that "Piku" becomes much more a simple story between a father and his daughter. So it can be concluded that Piku is much more than just a simple story of a careless and selfish father and a sensitive and his responsible daughter. It becomes the saga of human life and at the same time it reflects the life of the few insecure old age parents who have sensible, sincere and responsible children to look after them.

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